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ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS

TENNYSON

BY

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TENNYSON

CHAPTER I

BOYHOOD AT CAMBRIDGE

THAT the imaginative literature of a period preserves and represents the ideas, feelings, and manners of the generation to which it belongs, is sufficiently manifest. And Taine, in his exposition of the theory upon which he wrote his *History of English Literature*, affirms that any considerable literary work will exhibit, under careful analysis, not only the writer's state of mind, his experiences and way of life, but also the long-descended influences of race and tradition, the temper of his time, and the general intellectual condition of his nation. The choice of words (he says), the style, the metaphors used, the accent and rhythm of verses, the logical order of his reasoning, are all outward forms and signs of these complex impressions, and so of the environment that has moulded them. Literature, in short, may be employed by the critic and the historian as a delicate instrument for analysis, for investigating the psychology of the man and of his period, for laying bare the springs of thought and action which underlie and explain history. And poetry is the most intense expression of the dominant emotions and the higher ideals of the age.

Whether Taine did not press his theory too far

is a question that has been often debated; and at any rate the proper use of it demands a master-hand. Certain it is that each age has its peculiar spirit, its own outlook on the world; and that a great poet, or group of poets, absorb the new ideas growing up around them, and have the gift of inventing their appropriate fashion or setting. They are usually followed by a host of imitators; but when the work has been once well done, the highest imitative skill will not make it really worth doing again in the same manner; we must wait until the changing world closes one period and opens a fresh one. This point of view may perhaps be accepted in studying the life and works of one who has been the chief poet of our own time. It is true that the increasing variety and diffusion of literature during the nineteenth century interfere with the method of taking one writer, however eminent, as the intellectual representative of his society, and also that we do not yet stand at a sufficient distance from a contemporary poet to be able to measure accurately his position. Nevertheless, Tennyson's popularity grew so steadily and spread so widely for nearly sixty years, and his influence over his generation has been so remarkable, that his finest poetry may undoubtedly be treated as an illustrative record of the prevailing spirit, of the temperament, and to some degree of the national character of his period.

It is in Tennyson's poetry, moreover, that we must look for the chronicle of his life. That no biographer could so truly give him as he gives himself in his own works, are almost the first words of the preface to the admirable *Memoir* written of his father by the present Lord Tennyson. So thoroughly, indeed, and so

recently, has this biography been written, with such complete and exclusive command of all available materials, that in regard to the course and incidents of the poet's life it leaves almost nothing to be discovered or added; and every subsequent narrative must draw upon this source of information. Nearly all the private or personal facts and incidents connected with Tennyson or with his family have, therefore, been necessarily taken directly from the *Memoir*.[1]

Alfred Tennyson descended from a family that had been settled for some centuries in the north-east of England, at first in Holderness, beyond the Humber, and latterly in Lincolnshire. His father, Dr. George Clayton Tennyson, was Rector of Somersby near Horncastle, and of other small parishes. Mr. Howitt, writing in 1847, says of the Rector that he was a man of very various talents, something of a poet, a painter, an architect, and a musician. The poet's mother was Elizabeth, daughter of the Reverend Stephen Fytche. At Somersby he was born on the 6th August 1809; and when he was seven years old he was sent to school at the neighbouring town of Louth. In those days, and long afterward, boys made their first, often their hardest, experience of a rough world at a very tender age, for in these country schools the discipline was harsh and the manners rude; so that a child lived between fear of the master's rod and the bullying of his big schoolmates, and probably learnt little more than the habit of endurance. Professor Hales has left a record[2] of his experiences at this school, which

[1] The writer of this volume has made some occasional use of an article that he contributed on Tennyson to the *Edinburgh Review*.

[2] Appendix to vol. i. of the *Memoir*.

shows that the masters had a way of hitting the boys wantonly, an unconscious propensity to find amusement in giving pain that often becomes habitual. But Tennyson's school experiences, though early, were fortunately short, for after two years he was removed from Louth, and it appears that for the next ten years he was taught at home by his father, whose scholarship was considerable. No better luck can befall a boy who can avail himself of it than to be left to himself among good books while his mind is quite fresh; and Tennyson made full use of the Rector's ample library. His earliest verses, at fourteen or fifteen years of age, show uncommon promise; and in 1826, when he was seventeen, were published the *Poems by Two Brothers* (Alfred and Charles) upon a variety of subjects, grave and gay, evidently drawn from wide miscellaneous reading: the metrical composition is promising, while there are occasional signs of that descriptive faculty which matured so rapidly in Tennyson's later works. In 1828 he went, with his brother Charles, to Cambridge, and matriculated at Trinity College, where at first Alfred, being accustomed to home life, and not having passed through the preparatory ordeal of a public school, found himself solitary and ill at ease.

"I know not how it is, but I feel isolated here in the midst of society. The country is so disgustingly level, the revelry of the place so monotonous, the studies of the University so uninteresting, so much matter of fact. None but dry-headed, angular, calculating little gentlemen can take much delight in them."[1]

But his face and figure were both very remarkable, and his rare intellectual qualities could not long remain

[1] *Memoir*, vol. i. p. 34.

undiscovered. The list given in the *Memoir* of the friends with whom he consorted shows that he soon became intimate with the best men at Cambridge, whose admiration and attachment he rapidly won. It is evident that he had already a notable gift of terse and forcible expression, and the turn for apt metaphors which comes from a lively imagination. He lived among men who made the right use of a University, who delighted in the interchange of ideas and opinions, in the pursuit of knowledge, in the discussion of politics, in literature, speculation, and scientific discoveries; who were keenly interested in the world around them, and in the condition of their own country. In short, he was one of the few great English poets who have fallen in readily with the ways and manners of a cultured class and their social surroundings, who did not in their youth either hold themselves apart from the ordinary life of school or college, or live recklessly, or rebel against social conventions.

As the poets of the foregoing generation had been profoundly stirred in their first manhood by the revolutionary tumult in France, so Tennyson felt and sympathised, though more moderately, with the English agitation for reform. But in 1830 the period of wild enthusiasm for freedom, for the rights of man and for abstract political theories, had passed away; the vague hatred of priests and despots had become toned down into demands for reasonable improvements of Church and State. It was an age of practical Liberalism, of strong intellectual fermentation stimulated by the growing power of the Press; of energetic agitation for political, economical, and legislative reforms on one side, resisted on the other side by stubborn de-

fenders of antiquated institutions that were believed to be essential safeguards against the total overthrow of society. In those days the ardent young Liberal had a definite programme and a clear objective for his attack; though his impulse might be restrained by alarm at the violent methods and sweeping theories that were in vogue with extreme and resolute reformers. Tennyson was never of a sanguine temperament; and his reflective mind was always liable to be darkened by the apprehension of consequences. He represented, naturally, the temperate opinions on questions of Church and State of an educated Liberal, with whom rioting and violent Radicalism strengthened the fellow-feeling for widespread distress, and for the real needs and grievances of the people. The notes of bitter irony, the spirit of fierce revolt that run through the poetry of Byron and Shelley, belong to another time and temper. In Tennyson we have the Englishman's ingrained abhorrence of unruly disorder, the tradition of a State well balanced, of liberty fenced in by laws, of veneration for the past; we have the hatred of fanaticism in any shape, political or clerical, the distrust of popular impatience, the belief in the gradual betterment of human ills. In the verses to Mary Boyle, written long afterwards, he alludes to an incident that cannot but have accentuated his innate dread of mob-rule, which comes out in several passages of his later poems —

> "In rick-fire days,
> When Dives loathed the times, and paced his land
> In fear of worse,
> And sanguine Lazarus felt a vacant hand
> Fill with *his* purse;

For lowly minds were madden'd to the height
By tonguester tricks,
And once — I well remember that red night
When thirty ricks,
All flaming, made an English homestead Hell —
These hands of mine
Have helpt to pass a bucket from the well
Along the line."

When he was asked what politics he held, he answered characteristically, "I am of the same politics as Shakespeare, Bacon, and every sane man"; and he might not have objected to be classed, theologically, among those who restrict their confession of faith to the declaration that they hold the religion of all sensible men.

That Tennyson was numbered among the Apostles at Cambridge may be reckoned as a sign of his early reputation; the more so because he appears to have contributed very little, either by speech or writing, to the free discussions on things temporal and spiritual of that notable society. He is depicted as smoking and meditating, sitting in front of the fire, summing up argument in one short phrase; and the only essay that he produced he was too modest to deliver. Of the Apostles various reminiscences survive; the subjoined extract may be quoted to explain its constitution and character: —

"The very existence of this body was scarcely known to the University at large, and its members held reticence to be a point of honour. . . . The members were on the look-out for any indications of intellectual originality, academical or otherwise, and specially contemptuous of humbug, cant, and the qualities of the windbag in general. To be elected, therefore, was virtually to receive a certificate from some of your cleverest contemporaries that they regarded you likely

to be in future an eminent man. The judgment so passed was perhaps as significant as that implied by University honours, and a very large proportion of the Apostles have justified the anticipation of their fellows." [1]

In Tennyson's case the apostolic prophecy has been undoubtedly fulfilled; and his prize poem on Timbuctoo, written in his twentieth year, soon appeared to confirm among his friends their first augury of his future celebrity. It was patched up, he tells us, from an old poem on the Battle of Armageddon, a curious adaptation of subjects that might be supposed to have nothing in common; except, possibly, such hazy distances of space and time as might afford wide scope to a poet's imagination.

Academic distinction in verse may have often suggested predictions of coming fame, yet these are rarely fulfilled, for the stars of poetical genius run in irregular courses. Tennyson's poem had the usual qualities of correct taste and polished diction, but it also showed much originality of treatment and creative fancy; for the writer, instead of attempting the unpromising task of describing a den of savages, or of rendering poetically the accounts brought home by travellers, places himself on a mountain that overlooks the great ocean, muses over the fabled Atlantis, dreams of Eldorado, and asks —

> "Wide Afric, doth thy Sun
> Lighten, thy hills unfold a city as fair
> As those which starred the night of the elder world?
> Or is the rumour of thy Timbuctoo
> A dream as frail as those of ancient time?"

He is wondering whether the reality of some such

[1] *Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, by Leslie Stephen.

glorious vision may not be hidden far in the recesses of the dark Continent. To him appears the Spirit of the Ideal, symbolising

> "The permeating life which courses through
> All th' intricate and labyrinthine veins
> Of the great mine of Fable,"

and shows him a river winding through

> "The argent streets of the city, imaging
> The soft inversion of her tremulous domes."

But

> "The time has well nigh come
> When I must render up this glorious home
> To keen Discovery,"

when the brilliant towers shall shrink and shiver into huts

> "Black specks amid a waste of dreary sand
> Low-built, mud-walled, barbarian settlements.
> How changed from this fair city!"

This, the first poem of Tennyson, is worth notice because it contains in embryo the qualities which emerge in his later verse, his delight in picturesque and luxuriant description, his meditative power of falling into moods which give full scope, as in a trance or dream, to the roving imagination; his manner of presenting ideas symbolically. Although Charles Wordsworth wrote of it that at Oxford the poem might have qualified its author for a lunatic asylum, Arthur Hallam, who was beaten in the competition, laid stress, in a letter to W. E. Gladstone, on its "splendid imaginative power," and said that he considered Tennyson as "promising fair to be the greatest poet of our generation" — a remarkably far-seeing pre-

diction to have been built on so slender a foundation. A review in the *Athenæum* (at that time under the joint-editorship of John Sterling and Frederick Maurice) declared that it "indicated really first-rate poetical genius, which would have done honour to any man that ever wrote." The poem, in blank verse, was recited in the Senate House by the late Dean Merivale, since the ordeal was too much for Tennyson's habitual diffidence.

The *Memoir* has preserved for us several poems written by Tennyson at Cambridge (1828–1831) that were never published. In one of these, "Anacaona," which was suppressed (we are told) because the natural history and the rhymes did not satisfy him, the verses are full of glowing tropical scenery; but at that time he did not care for absolute descriptive accuracy. The scientific spirit, in fact, had not yet laid its hold on him; and the following stanza, given here as a sample, shows that he was taking his juvenile pleasure in sumptuous colouring and in sounding versification—

> "In the purple island,
> Crown'd with garlands of cinchona,
> Lady over wood and highland,
> The Indian queen, Anacaona,
> Dancing on the blossomy plain
> To a woodland melody:
> Playing with the scarlet crane,
> The dragon-fly and scarlet crane,
> Beneath the papao tree!
> Happy, happy was Anacaona,
> The beauty of Espagnola,
> The golden flower of Hayti!"

The "Song of the three Sisters" is in the same early manner, yet it clearly presages his later dithy-

rambic style; and the blank verse in the prelude exhibits the undeveloped quality of an artist in romantic landscape-painting —

> "The North wind fall'n, in the new-starréd night
> Zidonian Hanno, wandering beyond
> The hoary promontory of Soloë,
> Past Thymiaterion in calméd bays
> Between the southern and the western Horn,
> Heard neither warbling of the nightingale,
> Nor melody o' the Libyan Lotus-flute
> Blown seaward from the shore; but from a slope
> That ran bloom-bright into the Atlantic blue,
> Beneath a highland leaning down a weight
> Of cliffs, and zoned below with cedar-shade,
> Came voices like the voices in a dream
> Continuous — till he reach'd the outer sea."

Another piece may be worth quoting, as the first indication of the brooding philosophic mind that is reflected through so much of Tennyson's poetry —

> "Thou may'st remember what I said
> When thine own spirit was at strife
> With thine own spirit. 'From the tomb
> And charnel-place of purpose dead,
> Thro' spiritual dark we come
> Into the light of spiritual life.'
>
> God walk'd the waters of thy soul,
> And still'd them. When from change to change,
> Led silently by power divine,
> Thy thought did scale a purer range
> Of prospect up to self-control,
> My joy was only less than thine."

In these lines we have the contemplative mood struggling into as yet imperfect metrical expression; and the two foregoing quotations may be taken to

illustrate two salient characteristics of all Tennyson's poetry — his delight in external beauty, and the inward uneasiness of a mind oppressed by the enigma of human existence, yet finding solace in a kind of spiritual quietism, and in the glimmer of light somewhere far beyond the surrounding darkness.

CHAPTER II

POEMS, 1830–1842

BEFORE he left Cambridge (where he did not wait for a degree), his "Poems, chiefly Lyrical," were published. It has already been observed that a group of original poets take up the whole ground of their generation; they so act upon their audience, and are again reacted upon sympathetically, that, for a time, nothing new is said or shaped. This may account, in some degree, for the barren interval that may be noticed in the annals of a country's literature; there was one such interval at the end of the eighteenth century, when the era of classic composition had closed, and the Romantic spirit, just born, had as yet become hardly articulate; and since the closing years of the nineteenth century another dearth of poetry has set in. At the present moment the field is still held by Tennyson and Browning, nor has their challenger yet appeared in the lists.

When Tennyson came forward in 1830 the marvellous constellation of poets that illumined the first quarter of the century had almost vanished, in the sense of their work being finished; for although Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Scott were still alive, they had attained immortality; they were above and beyond the special influences of an altering world; they could not interpret or inform the aspirations or disquietudes of a younger generation. Those subtle,

indefinable modifications of style and feeling, continuous yet always changing, which go on in the world and around us, are nowhere more clearly perceptible than in poetry: the impress of a great master in any art deeply affects his immediate successors; but he has almost always given his best to his contemporaries in early manhood, and the school which he has founded can do little more than imitate him. When, as in Tennyson's case, he keeps the field and retains his productive powers for more than half a century, he may be likened to a great spreading tree that checks the upspring of vigorous undergrowth; he remains the model and criterion of poetic excellence. Yet an unconscious feeling that the vein has been nearly worked out produces the desire for novelty; while there is simultaneously a continuous growth of fresh ideas engendered by changing views of life, which demand their own interpreter, and have to fight hard for ascendency against the established taste. Here may probably be found one reason why the established organs of criticism so often go wrong in their estimate of an original writer when he first comes before the public; they judge by a literary standard that is becoming superseded; they are out of touch with the movements of the advancing party; they often maintain a sound æsthetic tradition, but they are slow to amend or enlarge their laws in accordance with new feelings and methods; they notice shortcomings and irregularities, but they sometimes lack discernment of the very qualities which attract the poet's contemporaries.[1] We know that even Coleridge,

[1] An acute and very interesting dissertation on the development of æsthetic taste and fashion may be read in Mr. Arthur

though he saw much beauty in Tennyson's poems, said that he could scarcely scan the verses, and passed upon them the criticism that the new poet had begun to write poetry without very well knowing what metre is. On the other hand, however, Coleridge said in his *Table Talk* (April 1830) — "Mr. Tennyson's sonnets, such as I have read, have many of the characteristic excellences of Wordsworth and Southey." It was long before the *Quarterly Review*, which began by treating him with contempt, could find anything better for Tennyson than sarcastic approbation. Yet the article in *Blackwood*, on his first volume, by "Christopher North," does show considerable discrimination, and on the whole, although Tennyson naturally resented it, must have been rather to his advantage than otherwise; for the critic undoubtedly hit with sharp but not unkindly ridicule the marks of affectation and lavish ornament that belonged to the poet's immaturity. Most of the pieces which *Blackwood* condemned were rightly omitted in subsequent editions; and in regard to those which he praised, the judgment has been generally upheld by later opinion. But a new writer's surest augury of future success is to be found in an ardent welcome by his contemporaries; it is a sign that he is not a mere imitator, however artistic, of past models, that he has caught the spirit and is quickening the emotions of the generation with which he has to live. Arthur Hallam wrote enthusiastically of the Lyrical Poems in the *Englishman's Magazine*; and in the *Westminster Review* John Bowring hailed the advent of an original poet, with powers that imposed upon him high

Balfour's book on the *Foundations of Belief*, chap. ii. sections 1 and 2.

responsibility for the use of them. Some of the pieces contained in this first edition were omitted in subsequent reprints, though of these several reappeared later; and all that Tennyson decided to preserve stand in the latest collective edition under the title of "Juvenilia." Here, again, as throughout his later work, we have the poet's tendency to doubts and to gloomy meditation on man's short and sorrowful existence, side by side with a kind of rapturous delight in the beauties of nature and the glories of art. We have the "Confessions of a Sensitive Mind" that finds no comfort in creeds, and ends with the prayer for light —

> "Oh teach me yet
> Somewhat before the heavy clod
> Weighs on me, and the busy fret
> Of that sharp-headed worm begins
> In the gross blackness underneath,"

followed closely by the brilliant vision of Oriental splendour in the "Recollections of the Arabian Nights,"

> "Then stole I up, and trancedly
> Gazed on the Persian girl alone,
> Serene with argent-lidded eyes
> Amorous, and lashes like to rays
> Of darkness, and a brow of pearl
> Tressed with redolent ebony,
> In many a dark delicious curl,
> Flowing beneath her rose-hued zone;
> The sweetest lady of the time,
> Well worthy of the golden prime
> Of good Haroun Alraschid."

Verily a sight to dispel carking intellectual anxieties. It may be remarked, however, that in this

passage, as also in the amorous lyrics to Isabel and Madeline, which are full of delicate voluptuousness, the juvenile poet is too pictorial; his way of producing an image of lovely woman is by enumerating her charms; he describes beauty in detail as it might be painted, instead of describing its effects, as the great poets, from Homer downward, are usually content to do. Although Tennyson's natural artistic feeling corrected his earlier manner in this respect, yet the propensity to be descriptive, to elaborate a picture as a painter works upon his canvas, remained throughout a leading characteristic of his poetic style.

Soon after the publication of his first volume Tennyson made a journey to the Pyrenees, where he had some secret meetings with the Spanish refugees who, under Torrigo's leadership, were concerting the rash enterprise against the Spanish government that ended with the military execution of the whole party when they landed near Malaga in November 1831. He returned to live at Somersby, and about this time more verses were circulating among his friends, by whom, particularly by Arthur Hallam, he was urged to publish them. At Cambridge they received unanimous Apostolic benediction, with perpetual reading and diverse commentaries, until they were brought out toward the end of 1832. The "Lover's Tale," written in the poet's nineteenth year, and partly printed, was judiciously withdrawn from this issue at the last moment. A long poem in blank verse, betraying immaturities of style which the other pieces showed him to have outgrown, would have marred, as Tennyson himself said, the complete-

ness of the book, and would certainly have added more weight than worth to the collection. For this volume undoubtedly contains some of the most exquisite poetry that he ever wrote — "Mariana in the South," "The Lady of Shalott," and "The Palace of Art."

His method of producing an impression by grouping details was used with great skill in these poems for scenic effects. In Mariana in the Moated Grange we see how a few words can take hold of and enchant the fancy until it conjures up images of the landscape, the mournful aspect of a decaying house in a level waste, the chill air of gray dawn, the varying moods of despondency that follow the alternations of sun and shadow, of light and darkness, as they pass before a solitary watcher who looks vainly for some one who never comes —

"About a stone-cast from the wall
A sluice with blacken'd waters slept,
And o'er it many, round and small,
The cluster'd marish-mosses crept.
Hard by a poplar shook alway,
All silver-green with gnarled bark:
For leagues no other tree did mark
The level waste, the rounding gray.
She only said, 'My life is dreary,
He cometh not,' she said;
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!'"

This profusion of accurate detail in filling up the picture is very characteristic of Tennyson's manner, so different from Wordsworth's, who is usually content to

paint the background of his figures by a few strokes.[1] This rare power of giving atmosphere to a poem — of suggesting the correspondence and interaction between the mind and its surroundings, between the situation and the subjective feelings — comes out even more forcibly in Mariana in the South, where we have the troubled sleep in exhaustion produced by intense heat, with the dream of cool breezes and running brooks, and the waking to consciousness of bare desolation —

> "She woke : the babble of the stream
> Fell, and, without, the steady glare
> Shrank one sick willow sere and small.
> The river-bed was dusty-white ;
> And all the furnace of the light
> Struck up against the blinding wall."

To those who have been besieged and cooped up for many hours by the fierce sun beating against the walls of some dismal place of shelter, these lines will vividly recall a familiar sensation.

When this poem, first published in 1832, reappeared ten years later, it had been almost rewritten ; but by comparing the two versions one can see how Tennyson had pruned and condensed his style, always aiming at greater precision, and at producing the vivid impression in fewer words. It may be interesting to set the two opening stanzas of each version side by side.

[1] For example, in "The Tables Turned — An Evening Scene," there is but one descriptive stanza —

> "The sun, above the mountain's head,
> A freshening lustre mellow
> Through all the long green fields has spread,
> His first sweet evening yellow."

(1832)

"Behind the barren hills upsprung
With pointed rocks against the light,
The crag sharpshadowed overhung
Each glaring creek and inlet bright.
Far, far, one light blue ridge was seen,
Looming like baseless fairyland
Eastward a ship of burning sand,
Dark rimmed with sea, and bare of green.
Down in the dry salt-marshes stood
That house dark-latticed. Not a breath
Swayed the rich vineyard underneath,
Or moved the dusty southernwood.
Madonna, with melodious moan,
Sang Mariana, night and morn —
Madonna, lo! I am all alone,
Love-forgotten and love-forlorn."

(1842)

"With one black shadow at its feet,
The house thro' all the level shines,
Close-latticed to the brooding heat,
And silent in its dusty vines:
A faint-blue ridge upon the right,
An empty river-bed before,
And shallows on a distant shore,
In glaring sand and inlets bright.
But 'Ave Mary,' made she moan,
And 'Ave Mary,' night and morn,
And 'Ah,' she sang, 'to be all alone,
To live forgotten, and love forlorn.'"

In both versions the abundance of epithets is remarkable; there is hardly a substantive unqualified; but in the later version the description is less particular, and altogether much more compressed.

The moral of The Palace of Art is the insufficiency of external beauty to ward off the discontent, gradually sinking into despair, that invades a soul when it has planned out a life of godlike isolation among the most perfect creations of painting, statuary, and architecture. Form and colour, great historical portraits, splendid landscapes, the purity of marble, the rich light pouring in through stained glass, adorn the Palace of Art. The working out of such a design strains the power of descriptive poetry to its utmost effort; for here it enters into a kind of rivalry with

the sister arts on their own ground: the poet must imagine images; he is imitating Nature at second-hand, and is among all the snares that beset word-painting. Tennyson attempted, but abandoned, the arduous task of "doing a statue in verse"; he struck out the five stanzas introducing the statues of Elijah and Olympias; he shortened his catalogue and weeded out his gallery; and the alterations which the poem underwent in successive editions show the labour that it cost him. He thus succeeded in executing a series of exquisitely finished pictures, having in his mind, possibly, the Homeric shield of Achilles; though the scenes on the shield represent movement, as on a temple's frieze, whereas Tennyson portrays also single incidents, figures, or effects of still life, as in a great picture gallery: —

"And one, a full-fed river winding slow
By herds upon an endless plain,
The ragged rims of thunder brooding low,
With shadow-streaks of rain.
* * * * * * *
Nor these alone, but every landscape fair,
As fit for every mood of mind,
Or gay, or grave, or sweet, or stern, was there
Not less than truth design'd."

In each stanza the keynote or *motif* is struck with a masterly power of suggestion, until we return to what poetry alone can express — the soul's delight in a representation of external beauty, and finally the intellectual weariness and spiritual prostration of the soul among all this outward magnificence.

"O all things fair to sate my various eyes!
O shapes and hues that please me well!
O silent faces of the Great and Wise,
My Gods, with whom I dwell!"

Her godlike isolation sinks into a feeling of consternation at her solitude —

> "As in strange lands a traveller walking slow,
> In doubt and great perplexity,
> A little before moon-rise hears the low
> Moan of an unknown sea."

Perfection of culture, Art for Art's sake, has no deep root in the heart of man, and flowers but to fade rapidly; it strikes a deep root only when it gives a moral representation of life.

Yet nothing is more rare or difficult than the presentation of some general truth, in prose or verse, by a story with inner significance, like the parables of a religious teacher. By symbolism, which is a more delicate instrument than metaphor, the second term of the comparison, the application of the narrative, is intimated but not expressed. If the meaning is vague or too much hidden, it is missed; if it is brought out too obviously, the mysterious charm disappears. In The Lady of Shalott we are not far below the high-water mark of symbolic poetry, the art which one of the latest schools of French poetry has been practising with doubtful success, being foiled mainly by the incurable lucidity and precision of the French language. The final version of this poem shows much less revision than in most of his early writings, although the careful pruning away of anything that might sound trivial or familiar is observable in such alterations as that whereby the Lady now writes her name "round about the prow," instead of "below the stern," where she wrote it originally, and where an ordinary boatman would have painted it. And since The Lady of Shalott is one of Tennyson's masterpieces, we may select it as an

example of his genius at a period when he had brought the form and conception of his poetry up to a point which he never afterward surpassed.

Undoubtedly his work is throughout elaborate, in the sense that he meditated long over the composition, and spared no pains to attain perfection. Tennyson arranged and polished indefatigably his blank verse, that purely English metre which more than any other gives scope to scientific construction, disdaining the adventitious aid of rhyme. The normal line consists, as every one knows, of five iambics marked not only by quantity but also by accentuation; and it is the mobility of the English accent, as compared with the regularity of prosodial notation, that gives such freedom to English verse, and is one of the elements that combine to make our language so excellent for poetry. And the skill of the consummate artist in blank verse finds its triumph in the infinite variety of measured sounds which he can draw from a five-stringed instrument that seems easy to play upon, yet is droning and tedious in all but a few hands.[1]

The return, so noticeable in English poets of the nineteenth century, to the divine and heroic myths of ancient Greece, may be said to have begun with Keats, who endowed them with new life by the ardent play of his romantic imagination, and did it none the worse for his slight acquaintance with the originals. Tennyson continued a similar treatment of them with much more accurate knowledge. The concrete and sculptured figures of the antique legend or fable, in Œnone, Ulysses, and Tithonus, were endued with warmth and

[1] See *Chapters on English Metre*, by J. B. Mayor (1886).

fresh colour by becoming the impersonations of the impulses and affections of modern life — love unrequited, lassitude, restlessness, the roaming spirit, the *ennui* of old age, philosophic ardour or serenity.

The poem of Œnone is the first of Tennyson's elaborate essays in a metre over which he afterwards obtained an eminent command. It is also the first of his idylls and of his classical studies, with their melodious rendering of the Homeric epithets and the composite words, which Tennyson had the art of coining after the Greek manner ("lily-cradled," "river-sundered," "dewy-dashed") for compact description or ornament. Several additions were made in a later edition; and the corrections then made show with what sedulous care the poet diversified the structure of his lines, changing the pauses that break the monotonous run of blank verse, and avoiding the use of weak terminals when the line ends in the middle of a sentence. The opening of the poem was in this manner decidedly improved; yet one may judge that the finest passages are still to be found almost as they stood in the original version; and the concluding lines, in which the note of anguish culminates, are left untouched: —

> "O mother, hear me yet before I die.
> Hear me, O earth. I will not die alone,
> Lest their shrill happy laughter come to me
> Walking the cold and starless road of Death
> Uncomforted, leaving my ancient love
> With the Greek woman."

Nevertheless the blank verse of Œnone lacks the even flow and harmonious balance of entire sections in the Morte d'Arthur or Ulysses, where the lines are swift or slow, rise to a point and fall gradually, in

cadences arranged to correspond with the dramatic movement, showing that the poet has extended and perfected his metrical resources. The later style is simplified; he has rejected cumbrous metaphor; he is less sententious; he has pruned away the flowery exuberance and lightened the sensuous colour of his earlier composition.

In the Lotos-Eaters we have an old Greek fable of wandering sailors reaching an unknown land of fruit and flowers; and the poem's rich long-drawn melody, with its profusion of scenic description, is in strong contrast to the quiet line and feeling of the Homeric narrative; where the impression is created by describing, not the environment, but its effect upon the men. "Whosoever did eat the honey-sweet fruit of the lotos had no more wish to bring tidings nor to come back, but there he chose to abide with the lotos-eating men, ever feeding on the lotos, and forgetful of his homeward way." Out of this the modern poet creates a splendid choric song, of way-worn mariners overcome by dreamy languor in a beautiful island, to whom their homes and their fatherland are becoming no more than a far-off memory. It may be that the ancient myth is a marvellous tradition of some real incident, when a shipwrecked crew settled down upon some island in a climate and among a people not unlike those which were discovered by the first European adventurers in the South Pacific Ocean; for even in the story of the Mutiny of the Bounty we can trace the influence of lotos-eating upon British sailors. The concluding strophe of the Ode as it now stands was substituted in 1843 for lines of a different structure and very inferior merit. The gods of Epicurus are the proper divinities

of the lotos-eaters; they look down carelessly through the clouds at the strife and misery of the world —

"Over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands."

In the picture of luxurious repose as the ultimate bliss attainable both in this world and in heaven we have the shadow of the earth projected on the sky; it is that natural reflection of human experience and desires which is the common source of all primitive conceptions of a future existence.

The *Quarterly Review*[1] noticed these poems in a sarcastic article (by Kinglake, the author of *Eothen*) that missed all the beauties, yet hit the blots. That the criticism, although short-sighted enough as an appreciation, was yet salutary, is proved by the corrections afterwards made by Tennyson in passages where the thin partition that divides simplicity from triviality had been overstepped, or where the metre had not yet attained the strength and sure harmonic tones of his later workmanship. These old-fashioned reviewers, like the headmasters who ruled great public schools by incessant castigation, laboured honestly in their vocation of maintaining the classic traditions; and there was a masculine common-sense in their discipline that was by no means unwholesome. But for an example of impenitent conservatism and of insensibility to true genius, because it was new, the following sentence taken from an article in the *Quarterly Review*[2] upon the poems of Monckton Milnes is not easily to be matched: —

[1] 1839. [2] *Ibid.*

"We are quite sure that he [Milnes] will hereafter obey one good precept in an otherwise doubtful decalogue: —

'Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope,'

and regret few sins more bitterly than the homage he has now rendered at the fantastic shrines of such baby idols as Mr. John Keats and Mr. Alfred Tennyson."

We have here the men who adore the great image of authority, and denounce all novelties as heretical. The reviewer adopts Byron's creed, but overlooks Byron's own triumphant desertion of it; for in his finest poems there is no trace of the great masters whom Byron professed to worship. He received a well-merited rebuke from J. S. Mill, who wrote in the *London Review* (1835) an article condemning the short-sighted incompetency of the *Quarterly's* critic, recognising Tennyson as a true artist of high promise, and passing upon The Lady of Shalott a judgment in which the present writer ventures entirely to agree: —

"Except that the versification is less exquisite, 'The Lady of Shalott' is entitled to a place by the side of the 'Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel.'"

For it should not have been difficult to perceive that in this second volume of poems the promise and potency of Tennyson's genius were clearly visible, and that the ascent was gradual because the aims were high. The blemishes often signified no more than exuberant strength; and James Montgomery's observation of him at this stage is generally true as a standing test of latent powers in a beginner: —

"He has very wealthy and luxurious thought and great beauty of expression, and is *a poet*. But there is plenty of room for improvement, and I would have it so. Your trim

correct *young* writers seldom turn out well. A young poet should have a great deal which he can afford to throw away as he gets older."[1]

Although Tennyson's father died in 1831, he remained with the family at Somersby Rectory until 1837, making occasional visits elsewhere, to Mablethorpe on the bleak Lincolnshire coast, to London, and once crossing the sea to Holland for a journey up the Rhine to Cologne and Bonn. It was a tumultuous period in Continental no less than in English politics; and though Tennyson welcomed the Reform movement at home, he was in some trepidation lest it might open the floodgates of democracy upon the foundations of ancient institutions. "The instigating spirit of Reform," he wrote, "will bring on the confiscation of Church property, and may be the downfall of the Church altogether; but the existence of the sect of St. Simonists in France is at once a proof of the immense mass of evil that is extant in the nineteenth century, and a focus which gathers all its rays."[2] His hope of never seeing "St. Simon in the Church of Christ" has at any rate been amply fulfilled; and the mere apprehension shows that he had not yet, naturally, measured the difference between a religion and a scientific philosophy, or the former's incalculable superiority in the domain of things spiritual. In religion, as in politics, Tennyson's convictions gradually settled down into a hopeful optimism, occasionally shaken by fits of splenetic doubt and of discomfiture at the spectacle of human errors and misery. He believed in the remote eventual perfectibility of creeds and also of constitutions; but about this time the vanward clouds were

[1] *Memoir.* [2] *Ibid.*

gathering on the political horizon, and he was never without some fear lest society might be caught unprepared in some sudden storm : —

"Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion, creeping nigher,
Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire."

This habit of cautious moderation and profound distrust of popular impatience, the dislike of excess or audacity in opinion which belongs to the contemplative artist, possessed Tennyson from youth to age, and occasionally lowered the temperature of his verse. Yet Tennyson, like Burke, had great confidence in the common-sense and inbred good-nature of the English people. Stagnation, he once said, is more dangerous than revolution. As he was throughout consistently the poet of the *via media* in politics, the dignified constitutional Laureate, so he was spared the changes that passed over the opinions of Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge, who were Radicals in their youth, and declined into elderly Tories. The temper of the times affected his poetry in a contrary way; for his ardour rather increased with his age. He attained manhood in the middle of the calm period that followed the long, tumultuous years when all Europe was one vast battlefield, when the ardent spirits of Byron and Shelley had been fired by the fierce rallying of the European nations against Napoleon. It was the Crimean War, twenty years later, that first brought out Tennyson upon the battlefield; while at home the subsidence of violent Radicalism encouraged his Liberal attitude toward internal politics.

In the autumn of 1833 came the news that Arthur Hallam, his dearest friend, who had been engaged to

Emily Tennyson, had died suddenly at Vienna, his last letter to Tennyson being dated a week before his death. Arthur Hallam may be counted among those men whom the unanimous consent of all their fellows marks out for high future distinction, and whose brilliant opening upon life, closed abruptly by early death, invests their memory with a kind of romance, explaining and almost justifying the antique conception of Fate and divine envy. Tennyson's heart was pierced with bitter sorrow, and filled with a sense of life's dreary insignificance. He wrote the first sections of his famous elegy upon his friend, and began that poem, The Two Voices, which takes up again the ancient strain of mortal man wrestling with the temptation to despair, when irremediable misfortune seems to render life nothing worth, a momentary existence destined to vanish into the cold oblivion that hides so many generations of the past.

The Memorial poem underwent many years of incubation. In the meantime Tennyson's mind was also on other poetic subjects. Sir Henry Taylor published in 1834 his drama of Philip van Artevelde, with a preface containing the author's views upon modern poetry in general, and some criticisms upon Byron and Shelley in particular. The essence of his dissertation was that "poetry is Reason self-sublimed," that Byron's verse was too unreasonably passionate, the product of personal vanity unbridled by sober sense and study; and that Shelley let his fancy run riot in melodious rhapsodies. It was the somewhat austere judgment of a cultured intellect upon the romantic revival, which was representing the demand for liberty and a wider range of ideas in art, as the Liberal move-

ment did in politics, among the poets whom Taylor designated as the Phantastic school. Tennyson's observation upon these criticisms is just and far-seeing: —

"I close with Taylor in most that he says of modern poetry, though it may be that he does not take sufficiently into consideration the peculiar strength evolved by such writers as Byron and Shelley, who, however mistaken they may be, did yet give the world another heart and new pulses, and so we are kept going. Blessed be those who grease the wheels of the old world, insomuch that to move on is better than standing still."[1]

No man, as we know, was less disposed than Tennyson to undervalue intellectual serenity or rhythmic perfection; yet he saw that Byron, with the fiery impetus of his careless verse, and Shelley, with his strong-winged flights into the realms of phantasy, were men of daring genius who had quickened the pace and widened the imaginative range of English poetry.

During these years Tennyson was living in retirement at Somersby. His correspondence, then and always, appears to have been so rare and fitful that it creates a serious difficulty for the ordinary biographer, who misses the connected series of letters that provide so important and interesting a clue to be followed in tracing the incidents, the opinion on passing events, the interchange of literary and political impressions, in the lives of illustrious or notable men. For paucity of correspondence Tennyson is indeed singular among modern English poets. Cowper, Scott, and Byron stand in the foremost rank of our letter-writers, and their correspondence is in volumes; while Matthew

[1] *Memoir.*

Arnold has actually predicted that Shelley's letters might survive his poems. Coleridge's familiar letters are amusing, pathetic, and reflective, full of a kind of divine simplicity; he is alternately indignant and remorseful; he soars to themes transcendent, and sinks anon to the confession of his errors and embarrassments. Wordsworth's letters contain rural scenery and lofty moral sentiment. They all belonged to the rapidly diminishing class of eminent men who have freely poured their real sentiments and thoughts out of their brain into correspondence with friends, giving their best without keeping back their worst, so that we can follow the stages of their lives and thoughts; and the letters thus preserve for us the clear-cut stamp of their individuality. The occasional letters of Tennyson given in the *Memoirs* are characteristic and entertaining, thrown off usually in the light play of wit and good-humour; but for early glimpses of him we have to rely mainly upon the letters or reminiscences of his friends. In 1835 he was with the Speddings in the Lake country, where he met Hartley Coleridge, who, "after the fourth bottom of gin, deliberately thanked Heaven for having brought them acquainted," [1] and wrote a sonnet in celebration thereof. A visit to Wordsworth at Rydal Mount he would not then be persuaded to undertake, though the Laureate of the day and his successor did come together at a dinner party a few years later. Mr. Aubrey de Vere has described the meeting; [2] and he has told us that Wordsworth soon afterwards wrote in a letter to a friend that Tennyson was "decidedly the first of our living poets." In connection with this incident Mr.

[1] *Memoir.* [2] *Ibid.*

de Vere is reminded of a conversation with Tennyson, who was enthusiastic over the songs of Burns — "You forget, for their sake, those stupid things, his serious pieces." The same day Mr. de Vere met Wordsworth, who praised Burns even more vehemently than Tennyson had done, but ended — "Of course, I refer to his serious efforts; those foolish little amatory songs of his one has to forget."

After 1837 the Tennyson family changed their residence more than once, first migrating from Somersby to High Beech in Epping Forest, and thence in 1840 to Tunbridge Wells. Tennyson made various excursions about England; and at Warwick he met again FitzGerald, who had been with him in the Lake country, when they visited together Kenilworth and Stratford-on-Avon, where Tennyson, seized with enthusiasm, wrote his name among those scribbled all over the room in which Shakespeare was born — "a little ashamed of it afterwards." He came by Coventry to London, and composed Godiva, of which Charles Sumner, the American, wrote to Monckton Milnes that it was "unequalled as a narrative in verse"; he also went to Bolton Abbey and North Wales, leading a tranquil and contemplative life in a period of political and ecclesiastical agitation, sedulously husbanding his powers, meditating on the problems of existence, and collecting impressions in his journeys about England. He was far from being indifferent to current politics or theological controversies; he took a close interest in the Oxford Movement; nor did he make light of the grievances and demonstrations of the Chartists. Yet his attitude seems to have been that of the philosophic spectator who surveys from a height

the field of action; he did not fling himself into the fighting line, like Byron or Shelley, whose poetry glows with the fiery enthusiasm of combatants in the strife over political or religious causes and ideas, or like Coleridge, who declared that all the social evils of his day arose from a false and godless empiricism, and anxiously expounded to Lord Liverpool the essential connection between speculative philosophy and practical politics.[1] The two short poems that were suggested (we are told) by the Reform agitation are in a tone of moderate conservatism: he praises the freedom that slowly broadens down from precedent to precedent; he despises the "falsehood of extremes"; and just as in Locksley Hall may be noticed a listening fear of mob rule, so in his poem Love thou thy Land, he is a cautious Liberal, ready to do much for the people, but very little by the people —

> "But pamper not a hasty time,
> Nor feed with crude imaginings
> The herd, wild hearts and feeble wings,
> That every sophister can lime" —

and his abhorrence of precipitate politics comes out in almost every allusion to France.

In his religious speculations he ponders over the question why God has created souls, knowing that they would sin and suffer, and finds it unanswerable except in that firm hope of universal good as the outcome, which is the reasoned conclusion of those who find the design of human life in this world unintelligible, unless another world is brought in to redress the balance, and which is thus the mainspring and support of belief in a future existence. There are

[1] See a wonderful letter in *Lord Liverpool's Life*, vol. ii. p. 302.

passages in the letters written about this time to Miss Emily Sellwood, during the long engagement that preceded their marriage, that indicate the bent of his mind toward philosophic questions, with frequent signs of that half-conscious fellow-feeling with natural things, the "dim, mystic sympathies with tree and hill reaching far back into childhood," that sense of life in all sound and motion, whereby poetry is drawn upward, by degrees and instinctively, into the region of the higher Pantheism. "Sculpture," he writes, "is particularly good for the mind; there is a height and divine stillness about it which preaches peace to our stormy passions."[1] Nor has any English poet availed himself more skilfully of a language that is rich in metaphors consisting of words that so far retain their primary meaning as to suggest a picture while they convey a thought.

The preservation of the rough drafts and rejected versions of passages and lines in poems of high finish, for the purpose of showing the artist at work, may not be altogether fair to him, and the practice in some recent editions of giving them in footnotes is rather distracting to those readers who enjoy a fine picture without asking how the colours are mixed. And when each page of fine verse is also garnished with references, with minute explanations of the most familiar allusion, and with parallel quotations from other standard poets, the worried reader is painfully reminded of his early school-books. Tennyson's poems have never yet been footnoted in this fashion, although no poet has corrected or revised more diligently; but the successive editions, which bear

[1] *Memoir.*

witness to his alterations, have been studiously compared more than once. To students of method, to the fellow-craftsman, and to the literary virtuoso, the variant readings may often be of substantial interest for the light they throw on the tendencies and predilections of taste which are the formative influences upon style in prose or poetry. It is from such materials that one can follow the processes of Tennyson's composition, the forming and maturing of his style, the fastidious discrimination which dictated his rejection of any work that either did not throughout satisfy a high standard, or else marred a poem's symmetrical proportion by superfluity, overweight, or the undue predominance of some note in the general harmony. One may regret that some fine stanzas or lines should have been thus expunged, yet the impartial critic would probably confirm the decision in every instance. He acted, as we perceive, inexorably upon his rule that the artist is known by his self-limitation, feeling certain, as he once said, that "if I mean to make any mark in the world, it must be by shortness, for the men before me had been so diffuse." Only the concise and perfect work, he thought at this time, would last; and "hundreds of verses were blown up the chimney with his pipe smoke, or were written down and thrown into the fire as not being perfect enough." [1] Not many poems could have spared the four stanzas with which the "Dream of Fair Women" originally began, and which E. FitzGerald quotes in an early letter as in Tennyson's "best style, no fretful epithet, not a word too much." It opens thus: —

[1] *Memoir.*

"As when a man that sails in a balloon,
Down-looking sees the solid shining ground
Stream from beneath him in the broad blue noon,
Tilth, hamlet, mead, and mound:

* * * * * * *

So, lifted high, the poet at his will
Lets the great world flit from him, seeing all,
Higher, thro' secret splendours mounting still,
Self-poised, nor fears to fall."

Yet one can see that the simile is unnecessary, and to a certain degree out of line with the general conception of a vision that passes in the night. He would strike out stanzas because they made a poem too "long-backed"; and he resolutely condemned to excision from the original Palace of Art some excellent verses, merely to give the composition even balance, and to trim the poem like a boat. This poem, in fact, was in a large part rewritten, for Tennyson evidently thought that too much brilliancy and opulence in the decoration of his Palace might run into gorgeousness. He withdrew two or three such stanzas as this: —

"With piles of flavorous fruit in basket-twine
Of gold, upheaped, crushing down
Musk-scented blooms, all taste, grape, gourd, or pine
In bunch, or single grown."

And this other stanza may have been omitted because the didactic or scientific note is rather too prominent: —

"All nature widens upward. Evermore
The simpler essence lower lies,
More complex is more perfect, owning more
Discourse, more widely wise."

At any rate, the preservation of these rejections (in the *Memoir*) serves to illustrate the gradual development of consummate technique; nor has it in this

instance damaged the artist, for we may rank Tennyson among the very few poets whose reputation would rather gain than suffer by the posthumous appearance of pieces that the author had deliberately withheld or withdrawn.

From 1833 the publication of more poetry was suspended, though not the writing of it. In one of E. FitzGerald's letters (March 1842) we have the following passage: —

"Poor Tennyson has got home some of his proof-sheets, and now that his verses are in hard print, he thinks them detestable. There is much I had always told him of — his great fault of being too full and complicated — which he now sees, or fancies he sees, and wishes he had never been persuaded to print. But with all his faults, he will publish such a volume as has never been published since the time of Keats, and which, once published, will never be suffered to die. This is my prophecy, for I live before Posterity."

And indeed the fallow leisure of this period bore an ample harvest; for after an interval of ten years the full growth and range of his genius came out in the two volumes of 1842. The first of these contained a selection from the poems of 1830, with others, much altered, which had appeared in 1832, and several new pieces. In the second volume all was entirely new, except three stanzas of "The Day Dream."

"This decade," writes his biographer, "wrought a marvellous abatement of my father's real fault — the tendency, arising from the fulness of mind which had not yet learned to master its resources freely, to overcrowd his compositions with imagery, to which may be added over-indulgence in the luxury of the senses."[1]

The criticism is just, for these new poems did undoubtedly attest the poet's rapid development of mind and

[1] *Memoir.*

methods, the expansion of his range of thought, his increasing command over the musical instrument, and the admirable vigour and beauty that his composition was now disclosing. He had the singular advantage, rarely enjoyed so early in a poetic career, of being surrounded by enthusiastic friends who were also very competent judges of his work, whose unanimous verdict must have given his heart real confidence; so that the few spurts of cold water thrown on him by professional reviewers no longer troubled him seriously. The darts of such enemies might hardly reach or wound one round whom such men as Hallam, James Spedding, Edward FitzGerald, the two Lushingtons, Blakesley, and Julius Hare rallied eagerly. Wordsworth, who at first had been slow to appreciate, having afterwards listened to two poems recited by Aubrey de Vere, did "acknowledge that they were very noble in thought, with a diction singularly stately." Even Carlyle, who had implored the poet to stick to prose, was vanquished, and wrote (1842) a letter so vividly characteristic as to justify, or excuse, another quotation from the *Memoir*: —

"Dear Tennyson, — Wherever this find you, may it find you well, may it come as a friendly greeting to you. I have just been reading your Poems; I have read certain of them over again, and mean to read them over and over till they become my poems; this fact, with the inferences that lie in it, is of such emphasis in *me*, I cannot keep it to myself, but must needs acquaint you too with it. If you knew what my relation has been to the thing call'd English 'Poetry' for many years back, you would think such fact almost surprising! Truly it is long since in any English Book, Poetry or Prose, I have felt the pulse of a real man's heart as I do in this same.

* * * * * * *

"I know you cannot read German: the more interesting is it to trace in your 'Summer Oak' a beautiful kindred to something that is best in Goethe; I mean his 'Müllerinn' (Miller's daughter) chiefly, with whom the very Mill-dam gets in love; tho' she proves a flirt after all and the thing ends in satirical lines! Very strangely too in the 'Vision of Sin' I am reminded of my friend Jean Paul. This is not babble, it is speech; true deposition of a volunteer witness. And so I say let us all rejoice somewhat. And so let us all smite rhythmically, all in concert, 'the sounding furrows'; and sail forward with new cheer, 'beyond the sunset,' whither we are bound."

The allusion at the end of his letter is, of course, to Tennyson's Ulysses, which Carlyle quoted again (1843) in *Past and Present*. He is recalling the concluding lines of this grand monologue, where the old warrior, who embodies the spirit of heroic adventure in the primitive world, and whose manhood has been spent in twenty years' war and travel, breaks away from the monotonous inactivity of life on a small island, and fares forth again as a sea-rover. The Odyssey and the Iliad are the unsurpassed models of all true epical narrative; the poet chooses certain incidents and actions that bring out character, that unite to frame a coherent picture of men and their times; and when the plot has been worked out to its *dénouement*, the story in each poem, as also in Milton's Paradise Lost, drops naturally to a quiet ending; to go further would have been a breach of the poem's unity. Yet the stamp of character is so firmly set upon Ulysses that the mind of man has never since been content with leaving him to a home-keeping old age in Ithaca; and one would almost as soon believe that Napoleon might have settled down placidly in

Elba or St. Helena. Dante takes up, in the spirit of the age that produced Marco Polo, the post-Homeric legend of Ulysses sailing from Circe's island, near Gaeta, out of the Mediterranean westward into the "unpeopled world" of the Atlantic Ocean, impelled by an ardent desire to explore the unseen and unknown.[1] On the other hand, Tennyson's hero has reached home, and has given family life a fair trial, but he finds it so dull that he is soon driven by sheer *ennui* to his ship, purposing to sail beyond the sunset and return no more. He exhorts his old comrades, as in Dante, to follow knowledge and make the most of the short life remaining to them all. As a point of minor criticism, it may here be noticed that in taking Ithaca instead of Circe's island as the place of departure on this final voyage, the English poet may have forgotten that before the Homeric Ulysses landed in Ithaca, a solitary man, every one of his companions with whom he left Troy had perished by sea or land during the long wandering. But fidelity to the original tradition is of no account in a poem that is independent of time and place. Our poet may have felt that he was touching a chord in the heart of the restless Englishman, who is seldom content with leisurely ease after many years of working and wandering abroad —

[1] This legend is partly confirmed, in a curious way, by careful recent investigations into the Mediterranean geography of the Odyssey, which have located, with much probability, the island of Calypso, the daughter of *Atlas*, on the north-west coast of Africa, near the Strait of Gibraltar. It is noticed, among other indications, that Calypso enjoined Ulysses to keep the north star always on his left in sailing back toward Ithaca, and that he followed this eastward course for eighteen days.

> "The long mechanic pacings to and fro,
> The set gray life, and apathetic end,"

are not for men of this temper. Whether they are chiefs of a petty Greek island, or citizens of a vast empire whose frontiers are constantly advancing, for them it is true that

> "All experience is an arch wherethro'
> Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
> For ever and for ever when I move;"

and Ulysses is the primeval type of the indefatigable rover for whom the Juventus Mundi provided unlimited regions of adventure, but whose occupation will soon be gone when the uttermost corners of the earth shall have been explored. Ancient myth, mediæval epic, popular ballads, retain and hand down the figures of such men, as they were stamped on the imagination of the times; and Tennyson's poem gives us the persistent character, blended with and accorded to modern feelings.

Ulysses is perhaps the finest, in purity of composition and in the drawing of character, among Tennyson's dramatic monologues. Of his other classical studies, Tithonus is one of the most beautiful conceptions of the mythologic Greek mind reset in harmonious verse — a fable that may be interpreted variously; whether of the desolate sadness that would be the penalty of surviving, the mere relic of a man, into a strange and distant generation —

> "A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream,"

or as a parable upon the melancholy futility and disappointment that may follow the coupling of blooming youth with extreme old age.

"How can my nature longer mix with thine?
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold
Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet." [1]

On the other hand, it is "the passionless bride, divine Tranquillity," whom Tennyson's Lucretius, wrestling with the satyr, vainly woos on earth, preferring at last to seek her by death in the high Roman fashion, and trusting that

"My golden work in which I told a truth
That stays the rolling Ixionian wheel,
And numbs the Fury's ringlet-snake, and plucks
The mortal soul from out immortal hell,
Shall stand,"

as assuredly it has stood and will endure. In these dramatic studies from the antique the single Roman figure is Lucretius, the only Latin poet who boldly grappled with those profound religious and philosophical enigmas that were always perplexing Tennyson's meditations, and whose conclusions must have been no less deeply interesting to him because they were so different from his own.

The march of blank verse, flowing onward with its sonorous rhythm, is well suited to these monologues. Tennyson, who believed that "Keats, with his high spiritual vision, would have been, had he lived, the greatest of us all," [2] observed also that his blank verse lacked originality of movement. It is true that

[1] Compare the Spanish epigram on a rainy dawn —

"Quando sale la Aurora
Sale llorada,
Pobrecita, que noche
Habra pasada!"

[2] *Memoir.*

Keats, who died before his metrical skill could be perfected, followed evidently the Miltonic construction; nevertheless, he stands in the foremost rank, if not first, among the nineteenth-century poets who may be said to have refreshed blank verse by a new exhibition of its resources for varied harmonies. And we may recognise an affinity, in cadence and rich colouring, between the first part of Hyperion and Tennyson's compositions in the same metre, whenever he takes for his theme some legend of antiquity. We may reckon, moreover, Keats as Tennyson's forerunner in the romantic handling of classic subjects, with a fanciful freedom not restrained by the scholarship that kept Tennyson closer to his models, and made him aim at preserving more closely the thought, to the extent of occasionally reproducing the very form and translating the language, of the Greek originals.[1] Both poets had the gift of intense susceptibility to the beauties of Nature, and with both of them the primitive myths were coloured by the magic of romance. But Tennyson's art shows more plainly the influence of a time that delights in that precision of details which the eighteenth-century poetry had avoided, preferring elegant generalities and elevated sentiments in polished verse. His work is essentially picturesque, in the sense that he could use words as the painter uses his brush for conveying the impression of a scene's true outline and colour; he can venture upon accurate description. The subjoined fragment, written on revisiting Mablethorpe, contains the quintessence of his descriptive style; the last three lines are sheer landscape painting.

[1] "Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy."

"Here often when a child I lay reclined:
I took delight in this fair strand and free;
Here stood the infant Ilion of the mind,
And here the Grecian ships all seem'd to be.
And here again I come, and only find
The drain-cut level of the marshy lea,
Gray sand-banks, and pale sunsets, dreary wind,
Dim shores, dense rains, and heavy-clouded sea."

So also in The Palace of Art the desolate soul is likened to

"A still salt pool, lock'd in with bars of sand;
Left on the shore; that hears all night
The plunging seas draw backward from the land
Their moon-led waters white."

Here every word is like a stroke of the painter's brush, put in to complete the sketch and to round off the impression; and this, as has been already observed, is characteristic of all Tennyson's workmanship; he does not give the effect of the scene, but the scene itself. For the different method of conveying to the mind's eye the scene through its effect, we may compare

"In such a night
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
Upon the wild sea banks, and waved her love
To come again to Carthage."

In the volumes of 1842 one remarkable feature of the new poems is the diversity of subjects and *motifs*. The second volume opens with the Morte d'Arthur, wherein Tennyson first tried his art upon the legends that are to be gathered upon the shores of old romance, enlarging the picture, and filling up his canvas with a profusion of exquisite detail, the sights and the sounds, the figures of the king and his knights, the

ruined shrine, the lake in the full moon, the clanging of Sir Bedivere's armour, the ripple of the water on the bank. The earliest romances had none of this ornament; they relied on the energetic simplicity with which a bard might relate what was said and done in some tragic emergency; their interest centred in the acts and incidents; they had little care for the descriptive setting of their narratives in landscape or supplementary decoration; their religion was miraculous and almost wholly external. Tennyson retains the dramatic situation, and treats it in a manner that satisfies the modern sensibility to deeper thoughts and suggestions, to the magic of scenery, to that delight in bygone things which is the true romantic feeling in an age when enchanted swords and fairy queens are no longer marvellous realities, and can only be preserved for poetic use as mystic visions. Arthur and his knights have fallen in their last battle; but the Round Table was "an image of the mighty world" in which the old order changes, giving place to new; they have lived their time and done their work; and so the legendary king vanishes, uncertain whither he may be going, into some restful Elysium.

One feature of the collection in this volume is the variety of subject and character. After the Morte d'Arthur, the last scene of a lost epic, come two rustic pastorals of the present day, The Gardener's Daughter and Dora; the latter remarkable for its pathetic simplicity, without one superfluous epithet or streak of colour, insomuch that Wordsworth is recorded to have thus spoken of it — "Mr. Tennyson, I have been endeavouring all my life to write

a pastoral like your Dora, and have not succeeded." And FitzGerald wrote that as an eclogue it came near the Book of Ruth. Wordsworth's pastorals, though of the highest quality, are constructed differently from Tennyson's; he tells a plain story or more often relates an incident, for the purpose of bringing out some single note of human feeling, the touch of nature that makes us all akin, and upon this he moralises reflectively. Next after Dora follow three sketches of quiet strolling through English fields, Audley Court, Walking to the Mail, and Edwin Morris. The mail comes in sight, "as quaint a four-in-hand as you shall see — three piebalds and a roan." We start with Edwin Morris and his friend by the lake, to hear

> "The soft wind blowing over meadowy holms
> * * * * * * *
> While the prime swallow dips his wing, or then
> While the gold-lily blows, and overhead
> The light cloud smoulders on the summer crag."

All these poems lap us in the caressing air of rural England at its best. Turn the page, and before us is St. Simeon Stylites, the type of wild Oriental asceticism, praying from the top of his pillar amid rain, wind, and frost; "from scalp to sole one slough and crust of sin,"

> "Battering the gates of heaven with storms of prayer."

The poet has leapt back out of English fields into the Egyptian desert. From this picture of suicidal misery and fierce mortification of the senses we pass abruptly to the idyllic love poem of the Talking Oak in an old

English park; and the next leap is again still further backward into the primitive world of Ulysses, the hard-headed fighting man,

> "strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

With this note of heroic character in the foretime struck by the concluding lines of Ulysses we again turn over a leaf, and are confronted in Locksley Hall by the irresolute figure of modern youth, depressed and bewildered by his own inability to face the bustling competition of ordinary English life, disappointed in love, denouncing a shallow-hearted cousin, and nursing a momentary impulse to

> "wander far away,
> On from island unto island at the gateways of the day."

Restlessness, *ennui*, impatience of humdrum existence, set him dreaming of something like a new Odyssey. But the hero of Locksley Hall is no Ulysses; the bonds of culture and comfort are too strong for him; the project of wild adventure is abandoned as quickly as it is formed; he remains to console himself with the march of mind and the wonders of scientific discovery. The contrast of ancient and modern character and circumstance was probably unintentional; but in noticing it we may take into account that while the Englishman had been crossed in love, the Ithacan had been remarkably successful with Circe and Calypso, and appears to have been always well treated by women, who may be overcome, like the rest of the world, by stalwart perseverance. The great and lasting success of Locksley Hall shows the power of genius

in presenting an ordinary situation poetically; how it can kindle up and transform common emotions, dealing boldly with the facts and feelings of everyday life. As a composition it has great original merit: the even current of blank verse is put aside for a swinging metre, new in English poetry, with rhymed couplets, passionate and picturesque, which follow one another like waves; each of them running directly to its point; and the long nervous lines sustain the rise and fall of varying moods. They stand now almost exactly as they were written originally, with one correction that greatly improved what is now a singularly powerful line.[1]

That a poem which is steeped in the quintessence of modern sentiment — an invective in Rousseau's vein against a corrupt society — should be connected by origin with the early poetry of the Arabian desert, is a notable example of the permanence and transmission of forms. We know from the *Memoir* that Tennyson took his idea (he said) of Locksley Hall from the *Moallakât*, the Suspended poems, composed by Arab bards in or about the seventh century of our era, and hung up in the Temple at Mecca. They are on different themes, but all of them begin with what is called the *nasîb*, a melancholy reflection on deserted dwellings or camping-grounds, that once were the scene of love and stolen meetings. Here we have the opening prelude of Locksley Hall; and in the first of the seven poems is to be found the allusion to the Pleiades with its metaphor; while other resemblances can be traced

[1] "Let the peoples spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change" (1842) altered to

"Let the *great world* spin for ever," etc.

in the mother's worldly counsel to her daughter, and in the ending of both pieces with a storm.[1]

One might almost regard The Two Voices as continuing in a deeper philosophic key the melancholy musing of Locksley Hall, and the two poems might then be labelled "Dejection." There is a similar disconsolate protest against the vanity and emptiness of life; there is the feeling of doubt and disillusion, the sombre self-examination; and that same vague longing for the battlefield as a remedy for the morbid sensibility that haunts so many studious men, which reappears later in Maud. And the poem ends like In Memoriam, with a revival of faith and hope under the influences of calm natural beauty, of household affections, and the placid ways of ordinary humanity. It is a soothing doctrine, and a wholesome medicine for the moodiness and ailments, the weariness of mere brainwork, that occasionally disturb a sequestered and uneventful existence; though it would hardly minister to more

[1] These parallels have been pointed out to me by Sir Charles Lyall, to whom all Arabic poetry is familiar, and whose own version of the couplet on the Pleiades is here placed side by side with Tennyson's stanza, for a comparison that is by no means to the disadvantage of the Arabian. It may be observed that the metrical arrangement of the original Arabic verse, by which each long line is composed of two hemistichs, giving a pause in the middle, and each couplet is complete in itself, is not unlike the movement of the English verse, and may have suggested it.

Tennyson.

"Many a night I saw the Pleiades, rising through the mellow shade,
Glitter like a swarm of fireflies tangled in a silver braid."

Imra-al-Kais.

"What time in the Eastern heavens the Pleiades clomb the sky
Like the jewelled clasps of a girdle aslant on a woman's waist."

perilous mental diseases, or relieve the perplexities of Hamlet. One stanza in The Two Voices —

> "'Consider well,' the voice replied,
> 'His face, that two hours since hath died;
> Wilt thou find passion, pain or pride?'"

recalls the masculine attitude of an age which, though inferior in poetic imagination, was perhaps for that very reason less troubled by thick-coming fancies —

> "A soul supreme in each hard instance tried,
> Above all pain, all passion, and all pride,
> The rage of power, the blast of public breath,
> The lust of lucre and the dread of death." [1]

And it is certainly refreshing, when two or three more pages of Tennyson's volume are turned, to find the spirit of undaunted faith and courage revived in the lofty stanzas of Sir Galahad, where the rhymes ring clear like strokes on a bell — a piece of consummate workmanship. We may compare the somewhat abject prostration of Stylites with the vigorous championship of his faith by the knight-errant —

> "My good blade carves the casques of men,
> My tough lance thrusteth sure;
> My strength is as the strength of ten,
> Because my heart is pure."

He stands here as a model of that purity and trustful piety which belong to the later conceptions of chivalry, when tales of enchantment were intermixed with the Christian mysteries. In the fragment of Lancelot and Guinevere we have the tone of the Renaissance, a picture of the courteous knight and his lady love set in a framework of brilliant English scenery, as they ride through the woods in the springtide of the year.

[1] Pope's "Epistle to the Earl of Oxford."

CHAPTER III

THE PRINCESS AND IN MEMORIAM

From 1842 to 1845 the sojourning of Tennyson in various parts of England and Ireland can be traced from his letters, which mention, however, few personal incidents, and allude rarely to public affairs. One of these refers to a trial of the water cure at Cheltenham; and in a letter of October 1844 to F. Tennyson, FitzGerald reports Alfred to be still there, "where he has been sojourning for two months, but he never writes me a word. Hydropathy has done its worst: he writes the names of his friends in water." At this time he had been persuaded by one Dr. Allen to put all his capital into a project of turning out wood-carving by machinery. By this whimsically rash investment he lost his money, a very serious blow to his prospects of marriage; and he fell ill with anxiety and vexation.[1]

In 1845 Mr. Hallam had drawn Sir Robert Peel's attention to Tennyson's merits and slender means, when Peel offered a small grant of one sum, excusing his inability to provide more at that time; but Hallam treated this as inadequate. Soon after-

[1] FitzGerald writes (1845) — "Dr. Allen is dead; and A.T., having a life insurance and policy on him, will now, I hope, retrieve the greater part of his fortune again. Apollo certainly did this; shooting one of his swift arrows straight at the heart of the doctor, whose perfectly heartless conduct certainly upset A. T.'s nerves."

wards Carlyle's solemn warning to Monckton Milnes, who had already been moving in the matter, that his eternal salvation would depend at the Day of Judgment on his ability to answer the question why he did not get a pension for Alfred Tennyson, appears to have been effective, for in 1845 the annual grant of £200 was communicated to him by Sir Robert Peel as "a mark of royal favour to one who had devoted to worthy objects great intellectual powers." The minister was balancing the claims of Sheridan Knowles, who was aged and had done his work, against the rising genius, when Milnes sent to him Locksley Hall and Ulysses; and it was the reading of Ulysses by Milnes to Peel, we are told, that determined the recommendation, which was made without any kind of direct or indirect solicitation from the poet. He wrote to a friend:—

"Something in that word 'pension' sticks in my gizzard; it is only the name, and perhaps would 'smell sweeter' by some other. I feel the least bit possible Miss Martineauish about it. You know she refused one, saying she 'should be robbing the people, who did not make laws for themselves': however, that is nonsense. . . . If the people *did* make laws for themselves, if these things went by universal suffrage, what literary man ever would get a lift? it being notorious that the mass of Englishmen have as much notion of poetry as I of fox-hunting."[1]

Herein, it may be observed, Tennyson does scant justice to the taste and to the generosity of the English people, who are at least as widely sensitive to fine poetry as any other modern nation, which is probably one reason why England has produced so much of it. Nor has an original genius, of strength and sincerity,

[1] *Memoir.*

ever had cause to fear the test of universal suffrage, if his themes have been, as with a great poet they always are, of a kind that are large and deep enough to touch all sorts and conditions of men: since no other art can compare with poetry at the highest level for its power of winning popularity. And this is the more remarkable when we remember that the poet of modern nations uses the language of a vast miscellaneous multitude, with complex tastes and in diverse conditions of life; whereas the masters of antique poetry had for their audience some comparatively small community, or a group of petty states and cities allied to them by kinship, in mind and manners alike, by whom the note, when sounded, was sure to be caught up. And so they were fortunate at first in "leaving great verse unto a little clan," to be preserved and handed down afterwards as the inheritance of all civilised peoples.

It was part of Tennyson's dubitating temperament that he planned out his foreign travels with interior misgivings, and with much wavering as to purpose and direction. FitzGerald writes (1845) that the poet "has been for six weeks intending to start every day for Switzerland or Cornwall, he does not know which"; and in 1846 we read again that he has been "for two weeks striving to spread his wings to Italy or Switzerland. It has ended in his flying to the Isle of Wight for autumn." However, in August of that year he did cross the sea to Ostend; and his journal of a tour through Belgium and up the Rhine into Switzerland gives jotted impressions of travel, marking his route and mainly recording his discomforts. He was knocked out of bed one morning at four o'clock to look at Mont

Blanc without the cloudy night-cap; "the glance I gave him did not by any means repay me for the trouble of travelling to see him," including, we may suppose, his disgust at the "infernal clatter of innumerable apes" in a Swiss hotel. Next year he was under hydropathic treatment in England, so much occupied with his poems that he suspended correspondence with friends and relations, wherefore the personal chronicle of this time is scantier than ever. He had been long meditating upon a social question that had been philosophically discussed since Rousseau's day, had been touched upon by Bentham and James Mill, but had never yet come within the sphere of practical English politics; and the outcome, in 1847, was his poem of The Princess.

Here is a romantic tale, with the Idea of a Female University for its theme and plot, and for its moral the sure triumph of the natural affections over any feminine attempt to ignore them, or to work out women's independence by a kind of revolt from the established intellectual dominion of man. The Princess repudiates a contract of marriage with a Prince to whom she has been betrothed in childhood, purposing to devote herself to the higher education of her own sex, in order that they may be mentally prepared to insist upon liberty and equality. But the Prince, with two comrades, puts on women's clothing; and they enter themselves as students in a college that admits women only within its bounds; they are speedily detected, as was obviously inevitable; and the contrabandists are scornfully expelled, as they fully deserved to be. The Prince's father declares war upon the father of the Princess to enforce the mar-

riage contract; but it is agreed to settle the quarrel by a combat of fifty picked warriors on either side; when the Prince is beaten down in the lists, and all the College is turned into a hospital for the wounded men, most of the girl graduates being judiciously ordered home. The Princess remains to nurse the defeated Prince and to read poetry by his bedside, with the natural consequence that in tending him she is drawn to love him, abandons her University, and marries her betrothed.

It is a beautiful serio-comic love-story, that has been treated over-seriously not only by those who dislike playing with a subject which is for them a matter of hard and earnest argument, but also by others to whom the poem is "the herald melody of the higher education of women." The logical conclusion from the *dénouement* is that matrimony is better for women than a life exclusively devoted to the superintendence of a sort of nunnery, in which girls are to be trained and fitted to cast off the yoke of men's pretentious superiority. Nor indeed was the college projected by the Princess as an alternative or antidote to marriage, but only in order that, if afterwards they chose to wed, they might do so on equal terms of intellectual companionship. A solid project of educational reform is surrounded with fantastic circumstances of romantic adventure, and is made the groundwork of some very fine poetry; while the substitution of women instead of men everywhere in the framework of college life and discipline gives ample room for artistic sketches of novel situations and costumes. The underlying social philosophy is, as usual, moderate and sensible: the supremacy of Love is temperately asserted; the

true value of the poem is rightly made to consist in its decorative beauty, in some delicate delineations of characters, in verse of sustained musical effect, and in a few exquisite lyrics that vary the unrhymed metre. The tender melancholy of a feeling that life may be passing without love, of vague regrets and longings, has never been more sympathetically expressed than in the song of Tears, idle Tears, with its refrain of the days that are no more, and the shadow of mortal darkness already falling over the season of youth: —

> "Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
> The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds
> To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
> The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
> So sad, so strange, the days that are no more."

Few know, Tennyson said long afterwards to his son,[1] that this is a blank verse lyric; and perhaps there is no better example of a metrical arrangement of words into musical passages, divided into stanzas by the recurring cadence of each final line. Another song, The Splendour falls on Castle Walls, charms the ear, on the other hand, by harmonious assonance and dwelling on long-drawn rhymes. But Home they brought their Warrior Dead, in which (to quote Charles Kingsley) "the sight of the fallen hero's child opens the sluices of the widow's tears," is the one piece that might have been written by an inferior songster, and it has earned popularity by touching a somewhat ordinary and facile note of pathos. It resembles too nearly an affecting anecdote. The amorous strain

[1] *Memoir.*

running through the whole poem indicates the undercurrent of natural passion which is sapping the whole edifice of female independence and self-reliance that the Princess has undertaken to build up on the basis of intellectual emancipation; while the hard lesson that all the refinements of cultured civilisation are powerless when confronted by the primitive appeal to force, is taught by the eventual dissolution of the University amid the clash of arms. It must be admitted that the Princess brought this catastrophe upon herself by the very drastic ordinance which decreed death to any man found within the walls of her college — a characteristic sample, though it may not have been so intended, of the quick resentment, the propensity toward short and sharp measures with offenders and enemies, that may be observed whenever women have risen to supreme rulership in troubled times. And the fact that all the illustrious types of feminine superiority cited by the Princess in her discourses, or by the Lady Ida in her professorial address — from the legendary Amazon down to Joan of Arc — are women renowned in war, might possibly be taken as the poet's subtle insinuation of female inconsistency. For the whole aim and educational policy of the College, if it was designed to promote equality between the sexes, should have been to denounce and depreciate the profession of arms, because that is the immovable cornerstone of masculine superiority.

The poem was materially altered and partly remodelled in the four editions that followed its first issue; and a line was inserted to show, as the *Memoir* tells us, that Tennyson "certainly did not mean to kill any one in the tournament"; though this casts a

shade of unreality over his description of a fierce encounter with sharp steel. Some passages in which the scornful invectives of the Princess border too nearly upon scolding,[1] are also judiciously struck out; and six of the songs were introduced in 1850. In regard to the metaphors and illustrative comparisons that abound throughout the narrative, we may notice how one point in a simile brings in a picture, after the Homeric fashion —

> "She read, till over brow
> And cheek and bosom brake the wrathful bloom
> As of some fire against a stormy cloud,
> When the wild peasant rights himself, the rick
> Flames, and his anger reddens in the heavens."

Here we have a reminiscence of rick-burning to illustrate a hot cheek; and one can see that the poet's mind was continually seizing, retaining, and coining into words the impressions of sight and hearing, even if he had not told us of his method.

"There was a period in my life (he wrote in a letter) when, as an artist, Turner, for instance, takes rough sketches of landscape, etc., in order to work them eventually into some great picture, so I was in the habit of chronicling, in four or five words or more, whatever might strike me as picturesque in Nature. I never put these down, and many and many a line has gone away on the north wind, but some remain." [2]

He proceeds to give specimens; and he further remarks, most truly, that he might easily have borrowed from

[1] "Go help the half-brained dwarf, Society,
To find low motives unto noble deeds.
* * * * * * *
"Go, fitter far for narrower neighbourhoods,
Old talker, haunt where gossip breeds and seethes."

[2] *Memoir.*

the energetic language of the people expressions and images which the critics would have credited to the effort of original creative fancy, but would have condemned as unreal and non-natural. For the vernacular speech takes its lights and shades directly from things visible;[1] and in its metaphors one can detect a survival of the primitive animism, as in Tennyson's instance of an old fishwife, who had lost two sons at sea, crying to the advancing tide —

"Ay, roar, do, how I hates to see thee show thy white teeth."[2]

When the popular superstition becomes a literary device, it is quite possible to abuse the poetic license that invests senseless things with a kind of human passion, as in Kingsley's verse of "the cruel crawling foam." But Tennyson never overcharged his metaphors in this way; and it is certain that in language what is true, what has been actually said, is often quite as strong as what has been imagined, and that no more powerful words can be deliberately invented than those which can be suddenly wrung out of a man by mortal danger or some violent emotion.

During the years 1846–50 Tennyson lived mostly at Cheltenham, making excursions to Cornwall and to Scotland, where he traversed the classic ground of Burns's poetry. It may be worth while to quote here a passage from the "Euphranor" of E. FitzGerald, where, in mentioning Tennyson's emotion on seeing "the banks and braes of bonnie Doon," he is led on to some striking and very sympathetic recollections of his friend.

[1] *E.g.* —

"He shall never darken my door."

[2] *Memoir.*

". . . The only living, and like to live, Poet I had known, when, so many years after, he found himself beside that 'bonnie Doon,' and — whether it were from recollection of poor Burns, or of 'the days that are no more' which haunt us all, I know not — I think he did not know — but, he somehow 'broke,' as he told me, 'broke into a passion of tears.' Of tears, which during a long and pretty intimate intercourse, I had never seen glisten in his eye but once, when reading Virgil — 'dear old Virgil,' as he called him — together: and then of the burning of Troy in the second Æneid — whether moved by the catastrophe's self, or the majesty of the verse it is told in — or, as before, scarce knowing why. For, as King Arthur shall bear witness, no young Edwin he, though, as a great Poet, comprehending all the softer stops of human Emotion in that Register where the Intellectual, no less than what is called the Poetical, faculty predominated. As all who knew him know, a Man at all points, Euphranor — like young Digby, of grand proportion and feature, significant of that inward Chivalry, becoming his ancient and honourable race; when himself a 'Yongé Squire,' like him in Chaucer, 'of grete strength,' that could hurl the crowbar further than any of the neighbouring clowns, whose humours, as well as of their betters — Knight, Squire, Landlord, and Land-tenant — he took quiet note of, like Chaucer himself."

Another journey was to Ireland, where the echoes of Killarney inspired the bugle song in The Princess. The *Memoir* tells us that he saw much of Thackeray and Carlyle, among other notables. He loved Catullus as a poet whose form and feeling, the sweetness of his verse and his enjoyment of reposeful rusticity, attest an affinity between two cultured civilisations that are separated by a long interval of time, though the contrast of morals is often wide enough. It was not in Thackeray's town-bred nature to rate the Roman high; yet we find him writing a handsome apology for having said in his haste, when Tennyson quoted to

him Catullus, that he could do better himself. Carlyle "had opened the gates of his Valhalla to let Alfred in," and evidently enjoyed high discourse with him. Between two such men there were necessarily frequent argumentative collisions, their minds were predisposed by training and temperament to divergent views, and their intellectual perspective was by no means the same. Carlyle saw the follies and iniquities of the world through a lurid magnifying glass; he prophesied ruin like an ancient seer, and called down the wrath of God upon knaves and idiots; while Tennyson's inclination was towards indulgence of human frailty, and hope in the slow betterment of the world. Violence in word or deed was to him antipathetic; and one may guess that he preferred to study heroes in their quieter moods, in some such fits of musing as those which Shakespeare interjects among scenes of furious action. He might have given us Cromwell reflecting in a soliloquy upon the burden of solitary rulership, surrounded by fanatics and conspirators. An extract from his conversations with Mrs. Rundle Charles indicates one point of what Tennyson thought about Carlyle, "You would like him for one day, but get tired of him, so vehement and destructive"; the fastidious poet must have found in him too much sound and fury, and may possibly have doubted whether it signified anything. FitzGerald says in one of his letters (1846) —

"I met Carlyle last night at Tennyson's, and they two discussed the merits of this world and the next, till I wished myself out of *this*, at any rate. Carlyle gets more wild, savage, and unreasonable every day, and I do believe will turn mad."

Tennyson preferred the Odyssey to the Iliad:

Carlyle, who liked fierce heroes, and had no objection as a historian to stern cruelty, though a little personal discomfort was intolerable to him, would probably have taken the other side; but on the subject of tobacco they were at any rate of one mind, and on all questions they disputed with amicable vigour. Later on Carlyle, at some moment when he was more than usually sour and crusty, described the poet as sitting on a dunghill amid innumerable dead dogs; meaning, as one may guess, no more than impatience with a man of rare intellect who seemed to him to sit dreaming on the shores of old romance while the State of England was rotten with shams and mouldy with whited sepulchres. But Carlyle afterwards confessed that "his own description was not luminous"; and though he cared little for verse, yet he could quote Tears, idle Tears, felt the spirit of the ballad of The Revenge, was quite upset when The Grandmother was read to him, and said towards his life's end that Alfred always from the beginning took the right side of every question.[1] About the same time FitzGerald writes of Tennyson: "He is the same magnanimous, kindly, delightful fellow as ever; uttering by far the finest prose sayings of any one."

It will be recollected that Arthur Hallam died at Vienna in 1833. Some of the sections of Tennyson's monumental elegy upon his friend were written very soon afterwards; and their number had rapidly increased by 1841, when Edmund Lushington first saw the collection and heard the poet recite some of them. It must have been not far from completion in 1845, since in that year Lushington was shown the

[1] *Memoir.*

stanzas upon his marriage with Tennyson's younger sister Cecilia, with which the poem is now concluded. Eight editions, all of them containing successive additions and alterations, followed the first publication of In Memoriam in 1850, which may accordingly be taken as the outcome of seventeen years' meditative composition. Of all Tennyson's continuous poems it is the longest and the most elaborate; it affected profoundly the minds of the generation among whom it appeared; it embodies the writer's philosophy upon the ever-present subject of life and death, upon all the problems suggested by the mutability of the world's face and forms, and on the questions whether human mortality may not fall within the scope of the universal natural law, whether faith in things spiritual is a true intuition, or no more than a hopeful conjecture, than a painting of

> "the shadows that are beneath
> The wide winding caves of the peopled tomb."[1]

The poet, like Bunyan's pilgrim, forces his way through the slough of despond, passes the caverns of Doubt and Despair, and emerges finally into resignation, with trust in the Unseen Power that is guiding all creation to some far-off divine event. In this noble poem — on the whole Tennyson's masterpiece — all natural things that catch his eye or ear remind him, by contrast or sympathy, of his bereavement, and interpret his personal emotion. Many of us know how the whole world seems changed and discoloured by some calamitous shock; and here the vivid sensibility of the poet reflects and illustrates this state of mind by figures, emblems, and solemn meditations.

[1] Shelley.

He is impelled by his own passionate grief to dwell upon the contrast between irremediable human suffering and the calm aspect of inanimate Nature, between the short and sorrowful days of man and the long procession of ages. From the misgivings and perplexities, the tendency to lose heart, engendered by a sense of being environed by forces that are blind and relentless, he finds his ultimate escape in the conviction that God and Nature cannot be at strife, that friends will meet and know each other again hereafter, and that somehow good will be the final goal of ill. His sure and never-failing mastery of poetic diction, gained by practice and severe discipline, carries him through this long monotone with a high and even flight; the four lines are fitted into each stanza without flaws, in singular harmony; the sections are complete in writing, measure, and balance.

No chapter in the *Memoir* contains matter of higher biographical interest than that which is headed "In Memoriam." A letter from the late Henry Sidgwick, whose clear and intrepid spirit never flinched before intellectual doubts or vague forebodings, describes the impression produced on him and on others of his time by this poem, showing how it struck in, so to speak, upon their religious debates at a moment of conflicting tendencies and great uncertainty of direction, giving intensity of expression to the dominant feeling and wider range to the prevailing thought.

"The most important influence of 'In Memoriam' on my thought, apart from its poetic charm as an expression of personal emotion, opened in a region, if I may so say, deeper down than the difference between Theism and Christianity:

it lay in the unparalleled combination of intensity of feeling with comprehensiveness of view and balance of judgment, shown in presenting the *deepest* needs and perplexities of humanity. And this influence, I find, has increased rather than diminished as years have gone on, and as the great issues between Agnostic Science and Faith have become continually more prominent. In the sixties I should say that these deeper issues were somewhat obscured by the discussions on Christian dogma, and Inspiration of Scripture, etc. . . . During these years we were absorbed in struggling for freedom of thought in the trammels of a historical religion; and perhaps what we sympathized with most in 'In Memoriam' at this time, apart from the personal feeling, was the defence of 'honest doubt,' the reconciliation of knowledge and faith in the introductory poem, and the hopeful trumpet-ring of the lines on the New Year. . . . Well, the years pass, the struggle with what Carlyle used to call 'Hebrew old clothes' is over, Freedom is won, and what does Freedom bring us to? It brings us face to face with atheistic science; the faith in God and Immortality, which we had been struggling to clear from superstition, suddenly seems to be *in the air;* and in seeking for a firm basis for this faith we find ourselves in the midst of the 'fight with death' which 'In Memoriam' so powerfully presents."

The whole letter, which is too long for quotation here, may be read in the *Memoir* as a fair representation of the effect produced by In Memoriam upon men of sincere and sensitive minds, who resolutely confronted the inexorable facts of human existence, yet were not content to treat the problems as insoluble. And so the wide impression that was made by these exquisitely musical meditations may be ascribed to their sympathetic affinity with the peculiar spiritual aspirations and intellectual dilemmas of the time. Dogmatic theology, notwithstanding the famous rallying movement at Oxford, had long been losing ground; liturgies and positive articles of

religion were out of credit; the proofs of Christianity by rational evidence brought religion upon the unfavourable ground of appeal to history and to questions of fact. Among average Englishmen a large number were willing to take morality as the chief test of religious truth, were disposed to hold that its essential principles were best stated in the language of ethics. The Utilitarian philosophers undertook to provide ethics with an experimental basis; and the researches of physical science threw doubt upon the actuality of divine intervention in the course, or even the constitution, of the world; they pointed to a system that was mechanical, though not necessarily materialistic. Then came, with a reaction, the energetic protests of those who saw and felt that Religion, which is to the vast majority of mankind a spiritual necessity, must not stand or fall by documentary evidence, must be placed in some region that is inaccessible to arguments from mere utility, that is independent of and untouched by the observation of phenomena or the computation of probabilities. Some endeavoured to show that the conclusions of Science could be reconciled with the orthodox traditions; others, as Newman, declared that there was no conflict at all, that theology is the highest science, entirely above and unaffected by what used to be called natural philosophy; but Tennyson saw that a serious conflict, a revolution of ideas, was inevitable. All speculation, physical or metaphysical, is necessarily affected by what we know of the world we live in; and the unrolling of the record of an immeasurable past compels us to look with new feelings on all that goes on around us. If we compare Tennyson with Wordsworth, we are at once aware

of a marked difference in their treatment of Nature. Wordsworth dwells mainly upon her calm, majestic, and kindly aspect; she is the homely nurse who endeavours to content the immortal soul of imperial man with his humble abode on earth; she is beautiful and beneficent; she "lifts the spirit to a calmer height"; and although Wordsworth may be occasionally touched by her insensibility to human sorrow, may be perplexed by finding her ways unintelligible, yet he discerns everywhere the interfusion of a divine spirit, the evidences of admirable arrangement and design. For Tennyson also the external world was sublime and beautiful, soothing his regrets and suggesting resignation to the common lot; but the illimitable expansion of time and space laid open by scientific discoveries, the record of waste and prodigality through countless ages, the disclosure of the processes of Nature, her impassive uniformity, her implacable regularity, took strong hold of an imaginative mind that was in communion with the thought and knowledge of the day. After Tennyson's death Huxley wrote that he was the only modern poet, perhaps the only poet since Lucretius, who had taken the trouble to understand the work and methods of men of science; though one may remark that the two poets found their consolation in very different conclusions. It now seemed to him that the scientific men were laying claims to a dominion which might place in jeopardy not merely the formal outworks but the central dogma of Christianity, which is a belief in a future life, in the soul's conscious immortality. Is man subject to the general law of unending mutability, and is he after all but

the highest and latest type, to be made and broken like a million others, mere clay in the moulding hands that are darkly seen in the evolution of worlds? The poet transfigured these obstinate questionings into the vision of

> "an ever-breaking shore
> That tumbled in the Godless deep."

He asks: Shall man

> "Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
> Who battled for the True, the Just,
> Be blown about the desert dust,
> Or seal'd within the iron hills?"

and he was haunted by the misgiving that man also might be no more than other atoms in the ever-changing universe, that prayer is fruitless, that death may be stronger than love, and that Nature gives no intimations of conscious survival. Nevertheless her face, as he sees it, is so fair that it brings him consolation. The alternations of the seasons, the storm and the sunshine, are reflected in his varying moods; the spring breezes carry a cheerful message, the autumnal gales accord with the unrest of his mind; a quiet sea turns his thoughts to the calm of death. He feels the immemorial touch of sadness in the brief lifetime of flower and foliage, in the passing of the long light summer days; yet beyond all these transitory images he looks forward to the twilight of eternal day on the low, dark verge of human existence, where the mysteries of pain and sorrow will be understood, and no more shadows will fall on the landscape of the past. After long striving with doubts and fears, after having

"fought with death," he resolves that we cannot be "wholly brain, magnetic mockeries" —

> 'Not only cunning casts in clay:
> Let Science prove we are, and then
> What matters Science unto men,
> At least to me? I would not stay."

After this manner Tennyson made his stand against the encroachments of Science upon the spiritual domain; though he refused to retreat, like some others, behind dogmatic entrenchments, and trod under foot the terrors of Acheron. By tight-lacing creeds, to use Carlyle's phrase, he would not be bound; he believed firmly in some indissoluble relation between human destinies and a divine providence; he reckoned the strenuous instinct and universal anticipation of some future life to be presumptive evidence of a truth; and he was confident that friends would meet and know each other hereafter. A poem which is a long epitaph must naturally touch in this consolatory strain upon the visitations of sorrow and death; but it must also remind us of the limitations, the inconclusiveness, that are inseparable from the emotional treatment of enigmas that foil the deepest philosophies. And since not every one can be satisfied with subjective faith or lofty intuitions, it may be that the note of alarm and despondency sounded by In Memoriam startled more minds than were reassured by the poet's final conviction that all is well

> "tho' faith and form
> Be sunder'd in the night of fear."

If, therefore, the poem strengthened in many the determination to go onward trustfully, on the other hand there was an attitude of terror in the recoil from

materialistic paths that lead to an abyss; and perhaps it may be so far counted among the influences which have combined to promote a retreat in the latter half of the nineteenth century toward the shelter of dogmatic beliefs and an infallible authority in matters of religion. But whatever may have been the intellectual influences of In Memoriam, we may agree that it enlarged the range of poetry by entering sympathetically upon the field of these fresh doubts and difficulties, and by showing how a mind that in grief turns naturally to religion may become absorbed in intellectual problems. Wordsworth found content in the contemplation of Nature; Science he despised, and such questions as whether God and Nature are at strife did not trouble his serene philosophy. Tennyson's meditations were turned toward the enigmas of life by the stroke of grief; and he was thus led, rightly, to fulfil the poet's mission, which is to embody the floating thought of his period. In those very popular lines

> "There lives more faith in honest doubt,
> Believe me, than in half the creeds,"

we have an antithesis, a kind of paradox, that concisely represents the prevailing state of many minds to whom scientific explorations brought increasing religious perplexity, until they obtained repose in the conclusion that essential truths lie somewhere beyond and are independent of all positive doctrines and formulas. "Our little systems have their day"; we may believe where we cannot verify, and Knowledge must have her place as the younger child of Wisdom. The poet leads us to a cloudy height; and though it is not his business

to satisfy the strict philosophical enquirer, he offers to all wandering souls a refuge in the faith

> "that comes of self-control,
> The truths that never can be proved
> Until we close with all we loved
> And all we flow from, soul in soul."

We know from the *Memoir* that Tennyson believed himself to be the originator of the metre of In Memoriam, until after its appearance he was told that it might be found in Elizabethan poetry and elsewhere.[1] Of the two specimens in Ben Jonson, one of them, the elegy Underwood, has a certain resemblance in movement and tone with Tennyson's shorter pieces in the same metre, probably because in this form the stanza carries naturally a certain dignity and sobriety of feeling, and is well suited by its measured regularity for compact and sententious expression. The interposition of a couplet with a rhyme of its own between the first and fourth line, stays the pace of the verse. Yet the high pathetic vibrations of feeling in the finest passages of In Memoriam prove that in Tennyson's hands the instrument had acquired a wider range; while the main current of his meditations passes through so many varieties of impressions or aspects of nature, the dim rainy morning, the short midsummer night, the bitter wintry day, with moods corresponding to these influences, that few will agree with FitzGerald's objection to the poem as monotonous.

In a little volume published in 1866 under the title of *Tennysonia*, the writer, who is an ardent admirer of

[1] A complete list of the writers who had used the metre is given in the commentary on "In Memoriam" by Professor A. C. Bradley (1901).

the poet, has been at the pains of pointing out, by parallel quotations, certain coincidences of thought and phrase between In Memoriam and Shakespeare's sonnets. Something of the kind is here and there faintly traceable, and the "ruined woodlands" in Maud might remind us of Shakespeare's likening the leafless trees to "bare ruined choirs, where once the sweet birds sang." But in Shakespeare himself, as in all other poets, similar reminiscences of this kind may be discovered, nor could they ever be rightly made an imputation against any great writer. FitzGerald gives the sound ruling on this subject in one of his letters — "I never speak of Plagiarism unless the Coincidence, or Adoption, be something quite superior to the general Material of him in whom the 'parallel passage' is found. And Shakespeare may have read the other old boy [Tusser] and remembered unconsciously, or never have read, and never remembered." The comparison in *Tennysonia* proves at most, and apparently aims at no more than proving, an inference that Tennyson's memory had assimilated the sonnets. And it is only of real interest when it shows occasionally how the ideas and impressions, which are as much the common property of all ages as the natural phenomena and human sensitiveness that produce them, are set in new frames by the chief artists of each succeeding time; how, to quote Tennyson, the thoughts of man are widened by the circling of the suns. The incessant battle between sea and shore reminds Shakespeare that the solid earth, and all that it contains, are shifting and transitory; while Tennyson's reflection upon the changes of land and water takes the vast scale of geologic periods —

"There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
O earth, what changes hast thou seen!
There where the long street roars, hath been
The stillness of the central sea."

The sonnets and In Memoriam have both for their subject the passionate attachment to a friend, living or dead; and each poet turns frequently to Nature for an image of his emotion or a response to it. It may be noticed, as a point of style, that whereas Shakespeare strikes off his image and fits it to his thought, in two or four lines,[1] the modern artist draws out a whole landscape, or accumulates picturesque touches —

"I find no place that does not breathe
Some gracious memory of my friend;

"No gray old grange, or lonely fold,
Or low morass and whispering reed,
Or simple stile from mead to mead,
Or sheepwalk up the windy wold" —

prolonging the description through several stanzas. Both poets are profoundly impressed by Nature's warning to man that all her works are perishable; but while Tennyson is alarmed by the sense of mortality, yet finds hope in some future state beyond, Shakespeare, with his "indolent and kingly gaze" at human fears and follies, propounds no reassuring speculation. Hamlet's last words are that the rest is silence.

In 1836, when Charles Tennyson married Louisa Sellwood, her sister Emily had been one of the bridesmaids. To her Alfred Tennyson became soon afterwards engaged; but in 1840 the prospect of

[1] "Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end."
— *Sonnet LX.*

marriage appeared so remote that correspondence between them was broken off, and ten years passed before the engagement was renewed. The wedding took place at last in June 1850, at Shiplake Church on the Thames, when the two became partners upon a very slender capital, including the expectation of a royalty on the published poems. They made a journey into western England, visiting Glastonbury and Arthur Hallam's grave at Clevedon. A very generous offer from Mr. Monckton Milnes of permanent quarters in a wing of his house at Fryston they would not accept; they took a house at Warninglid in Sussex, but the first storm blew a hole through the wall, and they departed hastily, to find at last a fixed habitation at Chapel House, Twickenham. Their first child was born, but died at birth, in April 1851, after which they travelled into Italy, meeting the Brownings at Paris as they returned homeward. Under the title of "The Daisy," Tennyson has commemorated this journey in stanzas of consummate metrical harmony, with their beautiful anapæstic ripple in each final line, to be studied by all who would understand the quantitative value (not merely accentual) of English syllables in rhythmic compositions —

> "But ere we reach'd the highest summit
> I pluck'd a daisy, I gave it you.
>
> "It told of England then to me,
> And now it tells of Italy.
> O love, we two shall go no longer
> To lands of summer across the sea."

Tennyson had at this time become the foremost poet of his day. His genius had been saluted by the

applause and admiration of his contemporaries, and was now under the glow of its meridian. In a contribution to the *Life of William Morris*,[1] Canon Dixon, writing of Oxford in 1851–53, says: —

"It is difficult to the present generation to understand the Tennysonian enthusiasm which then prevailed both in Oxford and in the world. All reading men were Tennysonians; all sets of reading men talked poetry. Poetry was the thing; and it was felt with justice that this was due to Tennyson. He had invented a new poetry, a new poetic English; his use of words was new, and every piece that he wrote was a conquest of a new region. This lasted till Maud, in 1855, which was his last poem that mattered."

This quotation, though one may demur to the final words, shows Tennyson's position and the attraction of his poetry for the younger men; and his general eminence had already been marked for public recognition. In November 1850, after Wordsworth's death, the Laureateship was offered to Tennyson. Lord John Russell submitted to the Queen the four names of Leigh Hunt, Sheridan Knowles, Henry Taylor, and, last on the list, Tennyson. The Prince Consort's admiration of In Memoriam determined Her Majesty's choice, which might seem easy enough to the verdict of the present day. The subjoined extract from the Queen's Secretary is worth quoting, to show that the Laureate's duties were not intended to be burdensome, and that the offer was made, as the letter ended by saying, as a mark of Her Majesty's appreciation of literary distinction —

"The ancient duties of this Office, which consisted in laudatory Odes to the Sovereign, have been long, as you are probably aware, in abeyance, and have never been called for

[1] By J. W. Mackail (1899).

during the Reign of Her present Majesty. The Queen however has been anxious that the Office should be maintained; first on account of its antiquity, and secondly because it establishes a connection, through Her Household, between Her Majesty and the poets of this country as a body."[1]

To refuse Wordsworth's succession, proposed to him on such honourable terms, would have been difficult; nevertheless Tennyson hesitated until his acceptance was determined by the right judgment of his friends. His accession to office brought down upon him, among other honoraria, "such shoals of poems that I am almost crazed with them; the two hundred million poets of Great Britain deluge me daily. Truly, the Laureateship is no sinecure."[2] For the inevitable levée he was accommodated, not without disquietude over the nether garment, with the loan of a Court suit from his ancient brother in song, Samuel Rogers, who had declined the laurels on the plea of age.

In 1852 the Duke of Wellington's death was the theme of the first verses published by the Laureate in discharge of his functions. It is remarkable, and to some it may be a consoling example of the necessary superficiality of day-by-day criticism, that we find Tennyson, in a letter thanking Henry Taylor for a just and discerning eulogium, writing that he is doubly grateful for it in the all but universal depreciation of his poem by the Press. Yet it is probably the best poem on a national event that has ever been struck off by a Laureate under the sudden impatient spur of the moment; remembering that for a poet of established reputation this kind of improvisation is a serious ordeal. Southey could only deplore George the Third's death

[1] *Memoir.* [2] *Ibid.*

in hexameters that were incontestably deplorable; and Wordsworth, as Laureate, attempted nothing of the sort. From this point of view Tennyson's success in the Wellington Ode, which is well sustained at a high level of solemn harmony, may be reckoned unique; though the original version, which must have been rapidly composed, was amended and strengthened in three subsequent editions. The intermediate changes were not invariably for the better. Of the two lines —

> "Where shall we lay the man whom we deplore?
> He died on Walmer's lonely shore" —

the second line, which is perhaps the weakest that Tennyson ever published, was inserted in 1853, and most deservedly ejected in the following year. In the couplet —

> "Mourn, for to us he seems the last,
> Remembering all his greatness in the past,"

one misses with regret the original second line —

> "Our sorrow draws but on the golden past,"

which is stronger in sound and feeling, and must have been changed for the prosaic reason that sorrow for the dead can never draw on the present. The keynote of heroic character is finely given in the lines —

> "Not once or twice in our rough island-story
> The path of duty was the way to glory."

They are repeated as the burden or lofty moral of the poem, and have taken rank among the quotations from English poetry that are familiar in our mouths as household words.

The true successors of the earlier bards, who celebrated in *chansons de geste* and in ballads the deeds and death of great men or some famous national exploit, have been, in quite modern times, poets who, like Campbell, Cowper, and the author of The Burial of Sir John Moore, spontaneously and unofficially, by some happy stroke of genius, seized upon some stirring incident of the time, and struck powerfully the right popular note. That this has now become generally assumed to be the vocation of the ideal Laureate, rather than the production of courtly verse, may be fairly attributed in a large degree to Tennyson, who evidently so understood his office, for he began thenceforward to write poems upon heroic exploits, or the incidents of national war. In this spirit he composed The Charge of the Light Brigade, a fine rolling war-chant, with a thunderous echo in the dominant rhyme, which gained hearty applause from the British soldiers in the Crimea, particularly for the well-known line — "Some one had blundered" — that was omitted in the revised version of 1855. In the Defence of Lucknow, an incident that is famous in the annals of the Indian Mutiny, there are passages full of vigour and animation, but on the whole too much vehemence and tumultuous activity; the poet endeavours to startle and strike the imagination by glowing pictures of the realities of a siege; he accumulates authentic details, he tries to give us the scenes and events with the roar of battle, the terror and the misery, the furious assaults and the desperate defence, as on the stage of a theatre: —

"Then on another wild morning another wild earthquake outtore

Clean from our lines of defence ten or twelve good paces or more.
Rifleman, high on the roof, hidden there from the light of the sun —
One has leapt up on the breach, crying out : 'Follow me, follow me!' —
Mark him — he falls! then another, and *him* too, and down goes he.
Had they been bold enough then, who can tell but the traitors had won?
Boardings and rafters and doors — an embrasure! make way for the gun!
Now double-charge it with grape! It is charged and we fire, and they run."

Here is abundance of fiery animation, but also too many descriptive particulars; and as the whole poem is composed in this manner, it resembles a vivid narration of events in pictorial prose. Such work hardly lies within the compass of the poetic artist, whose business it is to simplify and concentrate the general impression; and though the Defence of Lucknow is full of energy and ardour, one must pass upon it the criticism that the canvas is overcrowded and the verse too hurried and vehement for the ballad, or for the lyric of heroism, which is best when it gives a single tragic situation in clear outline.

In the poetry of action Tennyson made his highest score by The Revenge: A Ballad of the Fleet; although even this spirited poem, with its note of stately and unconquerable valour, hardly attains the impressive simplicity of the true ballad; it is still too circumstantial. We have here a splendidly versified narrative of a sea-fight, with all the atmosphere of the winds and the waves: it is a noble *chanson de*

geste, and the poem ends with the closing of the waters over the ship: —

"When a wind from the lands they had ruin'd awoke from sleep,
And the water began to heave and the weather to moan,
And or ever that evening ended a great gale blew,
And a wave like the wave that is raised by an earthquake grew,
Till it smote on their hulls and their sails and their masts and their flags,
And the whole sea plunged and fell on the shot-shatter'd navy of Spain,
And the little Revenge herself went down by the island crags
To be lost evermore in the main."

The distance of time lends its enchantment to this story, and three centuries gave Tennyson the right prospective; he could throw into strong relief the situation with its central figure, he could omit particulars because they were unknown; he followed perforce the natural instinct of popular tradition which preserves the broad lines of heroic character and achievement, leaving the rest to oblivion. Nothing is more rare in modern poetry than success in heroic verse — in the art of rendering with strength, beauty, and dignity the acts and emotions of men at moments which string up their energies to the highest pitch, and bring into full play the qualities of inflexible courage and endurance. To write of battles long ago is always hard enough, but in such cases romantic colouring is admissible, and the lapse of many years has luckily rubbed out all but the salient features of a great event or a daring exploit. When these subjects belong to contemporary history, to the modern bard's

own lifetime, the task becomes far more difficult, and has foiled poets of very high reputation, as in the case of Walter Scott, who has given us a magnificent battle piece of Flodden, but two very inferior poems upon Waterloo. You cannot be romantic over a contemporary battle or siege that has just been fully described in the newspapers, for the public knows exactly what happened; while if you attempt to be severely realistic you are lost among unmanageable details; and you find yourself emphatically versifying what has already been said with the effective actuality of prose.

CHAPTER IV

MAUD; IDYLLS OF THE KING; ENOCH ARDEN

In August 1852 a son (the present Lord Tennyson) had been born in their house at Twickenham; and in the next year they had at last found a permanent abiding place. For in 1853 Tennyson, having by this time an income of £500 a year from his poems, bought Farringford in the Isle of Wight, his favourite habitation ever afterwards, within sight of the sea, and within sound of its waves in a storm; with the lawns, spreading trees, and meadows running up to the skirts of windy downs, that have been frequently sketched in his poetry, and will long be identified with his presence. There he worked, morning and evening, at "Maud," sitting in his high-backed wooden chair in a little room at the top of the house, and smoking the sacred pipes during certain half-hours of strict seclusion when his best thoughts came to him.[1]

In 1837 a collection of verses had been published under the title of The Tribute, signifying that they were contributed by various writers of repute at that time, in order that the profits of a subscription list to the volume might be offered to a man of letters who had fallen into poverty. Monckton Milnes wrote round for subscriptions to all his friends, among others to Alfred Tennyson, who sent a humorous refusal,

[1] *Memoir.*

averring that he had sworn never to assist in such enterprises. Monckton Milnes did not appreciate the bantering tone of the letter, was angered by the refusal, and wrote a sour answer, whereupon Tennyson turned away his wrath with good-natured expostulation, and sent his contribution. It is a short poem of passionate lamentation for a woman who has been loved and is lost; and it not only contains the theme upon which Maud was long afterwards worked out dramatically, but the stanzas reappear, with slight changes and considerable omissions, in the twenty-fourth section of the later poem; nor did Tennyson ever rise higher in the elegiac strain than in some of the best of them:—

"O that 'twere possible
After long grief and pain
To find the arms of my true love
Round me once again!

* * * * * * *

"Alas for her that met me,
That heard me softly call,
Came glimmering thro' the laurels
At the quiet evenfall,
In the garden by the turrets
Of the old manorial hall."[1]

The fifth edition of In Memoriam had been published in 1852. It was followed in 1855 by the first appearance of Maud, which Lowell rather affectedly calls the antiphonal voice of the earlier poem. The change of subject, tone, and manner was certainly striking; and

[1] As The Tribute is now a very rare book, it is worth mentioning that this poem, in its original form, may be found at the end of vol. lxxix. of the Annual Register (1837). The sub-editor of the time was rebuked by his chief for having inserted among his selections from the year's poetry a bit of trivial verse.

the public seem to have been taken by surprise. The transition was from irremediable sorrow to irresistible passion; from philosophic meditation to a romantic love story with a tragic ending; from stanzas swaying slowly like a dirge within their uniform compass, to an abundant variety of metrical movement, according with the changes of scene and attuned to the development of the plot through ardent courtship to the lover's triumph, to detection, a duel, the frenzy of remorse, and the final chant of liberation from all these miserable memories, when "the old hysterical mock disease" is forgotten and overpowered in the tumultuous agitation of a great national war. The general reader was unfavourably prepossessed by the tone of restless despondency that runs through the opening stanzas, and by the intimations of a morbid temperament, of a sickly cast of thought, which are given as the premonitory symptoms of a mind unfitted to withstand the shock of a sudden catastrophe. The light literary reviewer was disposed to be satirical upon a hero whose attitude was not heroical; the higher criticism was divided. The poet was, in fact, contending against a difficulty that is inseparable from the form of a metrical romance in which a single personage tells his own story; for while a skilful novelist would easily have sketched such a character, or a playwright might have brought it out by action and dialogue, yet when a man is set up to confess his own intense sensibility, to describe his own misery and madness, the part becomes much harder to manage, and the audience is apt to become impatient with him. Nevertheless Henry Taylor, Ruskin, Jowett, and the Brownings spoke without hesitation of the

poem's great merits. Tyndall bought the volume on his way to a theatre one evening; he read it between the acts of the performance, continued it outside in the street, and had reached the end before he got home. He admired it extremely, and Lord Houghton, who agreed with him, exclaimed that the reviewers were blundering.[1] Jowett wrote: —

"No poem since Shakespeare seems to show equal power of the same kind, or equal knowledge of human nature. No modern poem contains more lines that ring in the ears of men. I do not know any verse out of Shakespeare in which the ecstasy of love soars to such a height."

This is certainly no faint praise; and although the general verdict would be that it is excessive, we have at any rate the first impression made by the poem's emotional force upon a very critical intellect.

"The peculiarity of Maud," Tennyson said, "is that different phases of passion in one person take the place of different characters"; and the effect of his own recitation was to set this conception in clear relief, by showing the connection and significance of the linked monodies, combined with the vivid musical rendering of a pathetic love story. The first spark of love kindles rapidly into heat, and the emotion rises by degrees of intensity to the rapture of meeting Maud in the garden, falling again suddenly to the depths of bitter despair; until the luckless youth again recovers heart and strength in the stir and rumour of national war, and determines, as many have done before him, to stiffen his nerves by a course of energetic activity, and to try the bracing tonic of real danger.

The poem in its development strikes all the lyrical

[1] *Memoir.*

chords, although it cannot be said that all of them are touched with equal skill. Probably the sustained and perfect execution of such a varied composition would be too arduous a task for any artist, since it is no easy matter to substitute, dramatically, different phases of passion in one person for different characters. Some considerable mental agility is needed to fall in with the rapid changes of mood and motive which succeed each other within the compass of a piece that is too short for the delineation of character: ranging from melodramatic horror in the opening stanzas to passionate and joyous melodies in the middle part, sinking into a dolorous wail, rising into frenzy, and closing with the trumpet note of war.

The Monodrama has in fact its peculiar difficulties of execution: the speaker has to introduce himself, and to explain the situation in a kind of indirect narrative that must be kept up to the lyrical pitch by effort and emphasis. The strain of this necessity is especially visible at the beginning of Maud, because the story opens with the familiar incident of financial disaster, and ordinary matters of fact have to be draped in the garb of poetry. The father of the soliloquist has been ruined by the failure of a great speculation, which is understood to have enriched Maud's father; and the son naturally denounces lying financiers and mercantile greed in general, contrasting the ill-gotten luxury of a society which must cheat or be cheated with the hideous misery and crime of the poor. If these be the cankers of a calm world, the blessings of Peace; if pickpockets, burglars, and swindlers are to flourish, he infinitely prefers "the heart of the citizen hissing in war on his own hearth-

stone," the ardour of battle, the supreme struggle that turns every man into a patriot and a soldier. Clearly the poet is here compelled by the story's need of elevation, at this part of it, to paint in sombre or startling colours, to rhapsodise somewhat beyond reason, to overflow with scornful invective, and to allow a solitary youth to justify his disgust of life by railing at the degradation and rottenness of the world around him. It is Locksley Hall with the cry of revolt against modern society pitched an octave higher; and in the first and fourth sections there is so much in this vein that the melodramatic impression is not easily shaken off. Englishmen at large hesitate over thunderous denunciations, in verse, of social wrongs; and the sorrows or disappointments of the money market are good matter for the prose writer, but hardly for the poet, who cannot be expected to give the economist or the politician fair play. Questions of this kind belong to the frigid utilitarian order, and it is dangerous to handle them enthusiastically.

But the vision of Maud, his playmate in childhood, scatters all these distempered complainings; and the young man becomes absorbed in the love of a beautiful girl. The wooing and the winning of her, the rapid growth of a mutual passion, the stolen meetings, the plighting of troth, the ecstasy of his adoration, the waiting for her in the garden after a ball, are told in a series of exquisite lyrics, of which it may be said that the English language contains none better than the very best of them. The subtle influences of sight and sound, of dawn and twilight,

> "the voice of the long sea wave as it swelled
> Now and then in the dim gray dawn,"

the call of the birds in the high Hall garden, the spreading cedar, the glance of an evening sun over the dark moorland, the chilly white mist falling like a shroud, mingle with and heighten the romance of their secret love passages, and bring shadowy presentiments of danger. The stars shine brighter as he looks at them and thinks of his sleeping lady: —

> "But now by this my love has closed her sight
> And given false death her hand, and stol'n away
> To dreamful wastes where footless fancies dwell
> Among the fragments of the golden day.
>
> * * * * * * *
>
> And ye meanwhile far over moor and fell
> Beat to the noiseless music of the night!
> Has our whole earth gone nearer to the glow
> Of your soft splendours that you look so bright?
> Beat, happy stars, timing with things below,
> Beat with my heart more blest than heart can tell,
> Blest, but for some dark undercurrent woe."

Yet the poet is still hampered by the necessity of explaining his plot, and of describing the *dramatis personæ* through the mouth of a single actor; and so the sensitive lover has to tell of his meeting with the young lord, his rival, who,

> "Leisurely tapping a glossy boot,
> And curving a contumelious lip,
> Gorgonised me from head to foot
> With a stony British stare."

This sharp figure-drawing, almost caricature, would be excellent in a novel or upon the stage; but when it is interposed among tender idyllic melodies there is a jar upon the delicate ear; there is a lapse into undignified expression which is incompatible with the refined exaltation of tone that is essential to a romantic passion-play. In his beautiful song of rapturous

expectation, "Come into the garden, Maud," the poet rises to the highest point of his verse just when the drama reaches its climax; for the end of the romance has come, and the whole pageantry of love-making vanishes like a dream. The lovers are detected, there is a furious quarrel, a fatal duel; and the unfortunate hero is next found, mad with despair and remorse, on the coast of Brittany.

The first title proposed for the poem was "Maud and the Madness"; and a leading specialist for insanity wrote that it was the most faithful representation of madness since Shakespeare.[1] Such a certificate is but of moderate value in poetry, where success depends on artistic treatment of the subject; and in Shakespeare the disease is never more than an accessory to the delineation of his principal characters. Hamlet was mad only when he chose to be so; nor is it possible to agree with Tennyson when he said, in alluding to some captious reviews, that "without the prestige of Shakespeare Hamlet (if it came out now) would be treated in just the same way" by incompetent critics. The two characters, Hamlet and Maud's lover, will not bear a moment's comparison from any point of view. But delirium is far less manageable in a poem than in a play, where violent scenes and speeches are admissible; and if we allow for this inevitable difficulty of execution, it may be agreed that the wandering incoherent mind of Maud's lover in his madness is effectively rendered. The final strophes of the poem have some strenuous and animated lines, representing a puissant nation rising boldly to the alarm of war, which is to purge the people of sloth

[1] *Memoir.*

and mean cupidity, and to unite them in one patriotic impulse. Some such notions of fighting as a wholesome restorative had been engendered, in 1855, among home-keeping Englishmen by forty years of peace; but since that time they have learnt by experience what war really signifies; and the belief that it is a good medicine for the cankers of plethoric prosperity must now have fallen considerably out of fashion. Mr. Gladstone, in the *Quarterly Review* of 1855, protested against the doctrine that war is a cure for moral evil, or that it is a specific for the particular evil of Mammon worship. He maintained, on the contrary, that modern war is a remarkable incentive to that worship; though Tennyson might have replied that in Milton's great council of war Mammon's speech is ignobly pacific. There is at any rate a curious adumbration of recent incidents in one sentence of this article, where it is said that "war in its moral operation resembles, perhaps, more than anything else the finding of a gold-field." Mr. Gladstone, however, considerably qualified his first adverse judgment in a note (dated 1878) that he appended to this article when it was republished in his *Gleanings of Past Years*—

"Whether it is to be desired that a poem should require from common men a good deal of effort in order to comprehend it; whether all that is put into the mouth of the Soliloquist in 'Maud' is within the lines of poetical verisimilitude; whether this poem has the full moral equilibrium which is so marked a characteristic of the sister-works; are questions open, perhaps, to discussion. But I have neither done justice in the text to its rich and copious beauties of detail, nor to its great lyrical and metrical power. And what is worse, I have failed to comprehend rightly the relation between particular passages in the poem and its general

scope. This is, I conceive, not to set forth any coherent strain, but to use for poetical ends all the moods and phases allowable under the laws of the art, in a special form of character, which is impassioned, fluctuating, and ill-grounded. The design, which seems to resemble that of the Ecclesiastes in another sphere, is arduous; but Mr. Tennyson's power of execution is probably nowhere greater."

The allusion to Ecclesiastes is enigmatic, for the Preacher deals with neither love nor war, and his theme is that all luxury, pleasure, and the delight of the senses, are but vexation and vanity. If any resemblance with Tennyson's poetry is to be found in Ecclesiastes, it should be with the Palace of Art.[1]

In the same article it is observed, truly, that Tennyson's war poetry is not equal to his poetry of peace. One may add that neither irony, nor fierce invective, suits Tennyson's genius very well; they carry him too near to the perilous domain of rhetoric. It is to the lays of love and heartrending lamentation in Maud, with their combined intensity and refinement, that unqualified praise may be accorded, to their romantic grace and their soft cadences, in which the melody seems inseparable from the meaning.

For Onomatopœia, which began by direct imitation

[1] Ecclesiastes ii. 4, 5, 6, 8, 11 —

"I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards:

* * * * * * *

"I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts.

* * * * * * *

"Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."

of natural sounds, has been developed by the highest art of poetry into prolonged associations of sound and sense. A single line may set the ear listening; it stirs the memory by recalling what has been once heard, or by making the words echo their significance, as for example in

"By the long wash of Australasian seas."

And the subtle sensibility that adapts the word to the thing adapts the sentence or cadence to the general meaning or spirit of a whole passage,[1] reviving the impression of a summer dawn in a garden, the scent of flowers, "the voice of the long sea wave." Recitation is a better test of these qualities than reading, for all poetry may be said to make its primary appeal to the ear; and even the length of the lines must have formed itself to a great degree on the natural conditions of respiration and oral delivery. It is versification regularly accentuated, with the terminal rhyme marking each line's end harmoniously, that now chiefly delights the English ear, fixing the measure by a recurrent chime, a beautiful invention that is nevertheless a comparatively recent importation into European verse.

In our earliest poetry the place of the accents was indicated by alliteration; while since there was no terminal bar, the line's length might be varied at the composer's discretion. Some of the cantos in Maud seem to have been so far constructed on a similar principle, that the lines vary considerably in length, and the rhyme is sounded with remarkable skill at irregular intervals, marking fluctuations of emotion. We have here, in fact, something resembling

[1] See a dissertation on Onomatopœia in Jowett's *Plato*, vol. i. p. 310.

what is called in France the *Vers Libre*, manipulated by a master of harmonies — a metrical arrangement of which, though it is no innovation in our poetry, Tennyson has made superior use. For although Southey discarded regularity of length in the verse of Thalaba and Kehama, the prevailing form in those poems is the ten-syllable blank verse metre, varied by shorter iambic lines, with a correctness of scansion that becomes monotonous. In Maud the poet by no means despises alliteration; he is rather apt to overstrain it occasionally as a method of enforcing the sense of a line by its sound, and of weighing its accentuation.

"The shrill-edged shriek of a mother divides the shuddering night"

"And out he walked when the wind like a broken worlding wailed,"

But the value of his experiment comes from his dexterity in expanding the undulating flexibility of the old English free verse, with the rhymes interposed as an accompaniment to the metre, and falling on the expectant ear like the chime of bells. Nor do we ever detect in Tennyson, as we do too often in Browning, the insincere or superfluous phrase that is brought in for the rhyme's sake, and is accommodated with more or less dexterity to the poet's real intention. Throughout his poetry we have constantly reason to admire his resource and capacity for shaping metrical forms to suit the impression that he desires to convey; while in such pieces as The Talking Oak we may appreciate the light and delicate touch of his hand upon the standard customary metres of our language.

Having by this time taken up his settled quarters at Farringford, Tennyson was now seriously occupied with his work upon the Arthurian legends, which had already furnished him with material for some of the best among his minor poems. Two Idylls were in print by 1857, and in 1859 the first four were published. The poet then took ship for Lisbon, whence he contemplated a journey into southern Spain; but he was an impatient traveller, who loved above all things his own land, not largely endued with the much-enduring temper of his Ulysses; so the autumnal heat and the mosquitoes drove him back to England within a month. Meanwhile, the Idylls were rapidly and widely taken up by the English public, with many congratulations from personal friends. Thackeray sends, after reading them, a letter full of his characteristic humour and good-fellowship —

"The landlord — at Folkestone — gave two bottles of his claret, and I think I drank the most; and here I have been lying back in the chair and thinking of those delightful Idylls, my thoughts being turned to you; and what could I do but be grateful to that surprising genius which has made me so happy."

Jowett wrote enthusiastically of the "Maid of Astolat" —

"There are hundreds and hundreds of all ages, men as well as women, who, although they have not died for love (have no intention of doing so), will find there a sort of ideal consolation of their own troubles and remembrances."

The Duke of Argyll's praise is slightly, though unintentionally, ambiguous. "Your Idylls of the King," he tells the author, "will be understood and admired by many who are incapable of understanding

and appreciating many others of your works." He goes on —

"Macaulay is certainly not a man incapable of *understanding* anything, but I knew that his tastes in poetry were so formed in another line that I considered him a good test, and three days ago I gave him 'Guinevere' — "

with the result that Macaulay was "delighted with it." Upon this Tennyson responds to His Grace somewhat caustically —

"My Dear Duke, — Doubtless Macaulay's good opinion is worth having, and I am grateful to you for letting me know it, but this time I intend to be thick-skinned; nay, I scarcely believe that I should ever feel very deeply the pen-punctures of those parasitic animalcules of the press, if they kept themselves to what I write, and did not glance spitefully and personally at myself. I hate spite." [1]

Folklore has rarely undergone such changes of style and transformations of environment in its passage through different countries and successive generations, as the Arthurian legend has exhibited from its origin among the Celts of insular Britain to its latest revival in modern English poetry. The lays and tales of Arthur and his knights, the relics of a large number that have been lost, were saved from oblivion in England by the Anglo-Normans, whose poetic instinct led them to enjoy in their courts and castles the songs of wandering minstrels and popular stories of marvellous adventure. Thus the primitive element took a Romanesque fashion, and was expanded in the spirit of mediæval chivalry; the legends were translated into French and English,

[1] All these quotations are taken from the *Memoir*.

until at last they were gathered together and fixed permanently in an English form when Caxton printed Sir Thomas Malory's collection. A whole cycle surrounds the central figure of King Arthur, whom one may conjecture to have embodied the true tradition of some valiant chief who fought hard for his lands and his people against the Saxon invaders; for in a prehistoric age it is the real hero, famous when he lived, who becomes fabulous after his death. And so Arthur emerged out of a period of darkest confusion, trailing after him Christian myths and heroic legends; he passed through wandering minstrelsy to prose romance, and then again into poetry when he became the portrait, in Spenser's *Fairy Queen,* of a brave knight perfected in the twelve moral virtues, the leading actor in an allegory that is supposed to teach morals and politics under a transparent masque of adventurous knight-errantry.

"The generall end, therefore, of all the book is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline, which for that I conceived should be more plausible and pleasing, being coloured into an historical fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter than for profite of the ensample, I chose the historye of King Arthur, as most fit for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many men's former works, and also furthest from the daunger of envy and suspicion of the present time."[1]

During the classical and rationalistic period of eighteenth-century poetry King Arthur's romantic figure suffered eclipse, until in the early nineteenth century Malory's book was republished. And lastly he shone out again fifty years later in the Idylls,

[1] Spenser's "Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh" (1589).

modelled by Tennyson after the type used by Spenser, as the image of lofty morality, the modern gentleman, the magnanimous husband of an unworthy queen. As Spenser dedicated his poem to "Elizabeth, by the Grace of God, Queen of England, France, and Ireland and Virginia," so Tennyson offered the Idylls as his tribute to the Sovereign of far wider dominions: —

> "But thou, my Queen,
> Not for itself, but thro' thy living love
> For one to whom I made it o'er his grave
> Sacred, accept this old imperfect tale,
> New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,
> Ideal manhood closed in real man,
> Rather than that gray king, whose name, a ghost,
> Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak,
> And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still; or him
> Of Geoffrey's book, or him of Malleor's, one
> Touch'd by the adulterous finger of a time
> That hover'd between war and wantonness."

Thus Arthur is still a poet's ideal and illustration of unstained virtue and manliness, with the difference that his environment of fairyland, enchantments, and adventurous gallantry, has become much more strange to modern readers than it was in the sixteenth century, when Spenser used the conventional romantic style and apparatus that were current in his day. Arthur does not even represent, in dim outline, the lineaments of some famous historical personage, like Charlemagne or even Roland; he is an unsubstantial and almost wholly fabulous model of chivalric perfection; the Round Table, the Knights errant, Merlin, the Holy Grail, are employed as the framework of a picture restored and repainted; the costumes and scenery of the drama are antique, with a revised

version of the characters. A modern romance of chivalry is necessarily a restoration, with the details of character, circumstance, and manners reproduced, as in Scott's romances, more or less accurately from the surviving records of the time. In the case of the Arthurian idylls this accessory work could not be done, because authentic materials are entirely wanting; the scenes, personages, and situations are either mythical, or at most reflect later mediæval ideas and types. To a certain extent this has been a drawback upon the popularity of a brilliant poetic enterprise; for it was inevitable that upon the critical, naturalistic, exacting temper of the nineteenth century in its third quarter the Idylls should have produced some feeling of incongruousness, of perfection in art with a lack of actuality — an impression of the kind that is delicately conveyed in a letter from Ruskin to Tennyson soon after the publication of the new poems. The four songs seemed to him the jewels of the crown, and certain passages he reckoned to be "finer than almost all you have done yet. Nevertheless" (he went on), "I am not sure but I feel the art and finish in these poems a little more than I like to feel it. Yet I am not a fair judge quite, for I am so much of a realist as not by any possibility to interest myself much in an unreal subject, to feel it as I should, and the very sweetness and stateliness of the words strike me all the more as *pure* workmanship. . . . Treasures of wisdom there are in it, and word-painting such as never was yet for concentration, nevertheless it seems to me that so great power ought not to be spent on visions of things past, but on the living present. For one hearer capable of feeling the depth of this poem, I believe ten would feel a depth quite as great if the stream flowed through things nearer the hearer. . . . I cannot but think that the intense, masterful, and unerring transcript of an actuality, and the relation of a story of

any real human life as a poet would watch and analyse it, would make all men feel more or less what poetry was, as they felt what Life and Fate were in their instant workings." [1]

Ruskin here touches and indicates a line of criticism upon the general conception of the Idylls, as shown by their treatment of the Arthurian legends, with which, although some may pronounce it inadequate, many may be disposed to agree. Romance-writing has been defined, half seriously, as the art of producing the literary work that can give the greatest imaginative pleasure to a people in the actual state of their habits and beliefs. The Idylls adapted the mythical tales of the Round Table to the very highest standard of æsthetic taste, intellectual refinement, and moral delicacy then prevailing in cultivated English society; and by that society they were very cordially appreciated. Undoubtedly the figure of Arthur — representing a warrior-king endowed with the qualities of unselfishness, clemency, generosity, and noble trustfulness, yet betrayed by his wife and his familiar friend, forgiving her, and going forth to die in a lost fight against treacherous rebels — has a grandeur and a pathos that might well affect a gravely emotional people. Moreover, the poem is a splendidly illuminated Morality, unfolding scenes and incidents that illustrate heroic virtues and human frailties, gallantry, sore temptations, domestic perfidy, chaste virginal love, and subtle amorous enchantments. It abounds also in descriptive passages which attest the close attention of the poet's ear and eye to natural sights and sounds, and his rare faculty of fashioning his verse to their colours and echoes. In short, to quote from the *Memoir* : —

[1] *Memoir.*

"He has made these old legends his own, restored the idealism, infused into them a spirit of modern thought and of ethical significance; setting his characters in a rich and varied landscape."

This indeed he has done well. And yet these archaic stories, as they are told in Malory's fifteenth-century English, which preserves the romantic flavour, have never lost their hold on the English world at large. In their latest form they have to contend with the modern prejudice against unreality, against the sense that we have here a vision not merely of things that are past, but of things that could never have been, of a world that is neither ancient nor modern, but a fairyland peopled with knights and dames whose habits and conversation are adjusted to the decorous manners of our nineteenth century. In Malory's time the legends were apparently regarded by the ordinary reader as belonging to what we should call the Romance of History, for Caxton relates that he was much pressed "to emprynte the noble history of the Saynt Graal and that most renowned crysten king, Arthur," but that he long hesitated because of the opinion that all such books as had been made of Arthur had been "but fayned and fabled." Yet when Malory's book was reprinted in 1634, the editor indignantly reproved, in his preface, the incredulity and stupidity of those who deny or make doubt of Arthur's immortal name and fame; and as to the manner of writing, he affirmed that he has only corrected it where "King Arthur and some of his knights were declared to swear prophane and use superstitious speeches." The tradition was still regarded as not wholly fictitious, with the charm of antique diction hanging about it to

encourage the illusion; and marvels and miracles, gods and giants, were commonly accepted with a kind of half belief by readers who took little account of the Improbable or the Unnatural. But this conventional understanding has long disappeared; the conceptions are now universally admitted to be "fayned and fabled"; and it has become much more difficult to use the old legends as mere vehicles for new manners and ideas than it was to translate the Celtic folklore into the language of mediæval romance. Spenser's *Fairy Queen* was frankly allegorical; and if we regard the Idylls also as beautiful allegories, we may be content, as their author was, with his suggestion that King Arthur represents conscience, and that the poem is a picture of the different ways in which men looked on conscience, some reverencing it as a heaven-born king, others ascribing to it an earthly origin — a philosophical argument set forth in a parable. We may then be satisfied with learning, from the poet himself, that "Camelot, for instance, a city of shadowy palaces, is everywhere symbolical of the gradual growth of human beliefs and institutions, and of the spiritual development of man." Symbolism is an instrument by which the severe and peremptory dictates of formal philosophy or religion are softened down and shaped for poetic expression; and in the light of this interpretation the Idylls are seen to be a finely woven tissue of figurative mysticism, clothing the antique forms with fresh esoteric meaning.

"The Holy Grail," said Tennyson, "is one of the most imaginative of my poems. I have expressed there my strong feeling as to the reality of the Unseen"; and truly in no other Idyll does the spiritual signifi-

cance stand out so clearly: it is the most successful of his excursions into this field of allegorical romance. From the same point of view we may admire and interpret, to a certain extent, the whole collection, though it must be remarked that stories with a moral lesson, however beautifully told, are not precisely allegories. Moreover, Tennyson has also said that "there is no single fact or incident in the Idylls, however seemingly mystical, which cannot be explained without any mystery or allegory whatever," and he constantly protested against pressing too far the search for an inner meaning; he would not admit an obligation to find it everywhere. He would have probably accepted the theory that his poem should be treated as a renewed presentation of the tragic experience of life, where men and women pay the inevitable penalty of sin and vice; and where nevertheless the highest nobility of character will not always ward off unmerited disaster and final catastrophe. The legend of a king's ruin through his wife's infidelity is an ancient tale of wrong, that has stamped itself on the popular imagination by its dramatic force and the contrast of characters. Arthur the King, Lancelot the chief warrior of his host, Guinevere the peerless beauty who brings discord between them, Modred the traitor knight, represent personages that belong to epic and romance in various distant ages and countries; the traitor meets his punishment, but the hero perishes unhappily. Such was the lesson of the primitive story-teller, from Homer downward, who drew life from natural experience, not as it is seen through the romantic colouring of a softer moralising age. And the same lesson is to

be read in the Idylls, although the action of the drama, the conduct and character of the leading personages, are applied and brought home to the modern reader by so far readjusting them as to bring them nearer to the feelings and proprieties of the present day. They are made more probable in order that they may be more impressive; the poet has preserved the ideals, clothing them in new conventional garments.

That Tennyson could excel in the art of veiling an experience of all ages under an allegory we know from his short poem, The Lady of Shalott, where the mirror of the shadows of the passing world, and the magic web that the lady weaves wearily, are brought in to give an atmosphere of mystery to the story of the Maid of Astolat's hopeless passion for Lancelot. But in the Idyll of Lancelot and Elaine the treatment is no longer mysterious but naturalistic; we have the maiden's timid adoration of the magnificent knight, the grief and trouble of her father and brothers, and the Queen's angry jealousy at hearing that Lancelot is wearing the maiden's token. The shy sweetness of Elaine, who is dying of unrequited love, is contrasted with the figure of the superb imperious Guinevere, who scorns her husband, "a moral child without the craft to rule," and sharply suspects her paramour. Lancelot offers her the diamonds which he has won with a sore wound at a tournament, and she flings them out of her window into the river, just as the barge with the dead Maid of Astolat comes floating down before the palace. This incident has a distant resemblance to some drama of modern society, and, indeed, the moral of this Idyll is so plain as to need no allegorical interpretation; it

is a true parable and warning for men and women always and everywhere. The Idyll interweaves some magnificent embroidery upon the unvarnished canvas of the old romance; it contains the plaintive song —

> "Sweet is true love tho' given in vain, in vain;
> And sweet is death who puts an end to pain" —

the sighing of innocent love sinking to quiet despair — with many passages of tender grace and animating imagery —

> "They couch'd their spears and prick'd their steeds, and thus,
> Their plumes driv'n backward by the wind they made
> In moving, all together down upon him
> Bare, as a wild wave in the wide North-sea
> Green-glimmering toward the summit, bears, with all
> Its stormy crests that smoke against the skies,
> Down on a bark, and overbears the bark,
> And him that helms it, so they overbore
> Sir Lancelot and his charger."

At the central situation and catastrophe of the Arthurian epic we have a still more remarkable reconstruction of plot and character. In the old chronicle, when Lancelot and Guinevere are at last entrapped and beset, the knight fights his way out, and the Queen is condemned by her husband to be burnt alive, but is rescued by Lancelot after much bloodshed; and the great war begins in which the whole Table Round is dissolved. Lancelot surrenders the Queen to King Arthur, who takes her back as Menelaus took Helen back to Lacedæmon; there is the same sentiment of a woman's comparative irresponsibility when fierce warriors are contending for her; and Guinevere does not become a nun until Arthur has

been slain in the last battle. The sympathy of the chronicle is entirely with Guinevere —

"Therefore, all ye that be lovers, call into your remembrance the moneth of May, as did Queen Guinevere, for whom I make here a little mention, that while she loved she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end."

She is here the persistent type of the fatal woman who brings about a hero's death, the legendary cause of wars, assassinations, and the loss of kingdoms, as she is still the cause of bloodsheds and revengeful murders among warlike tribes; her misconduct is now in civilised society no more than a private misfortune, it was formerly a public calamity. And yet the old Celtic romance treats Guinevere with indulgence and pity, for it is a tale of unhappy love. In Tennyson's Idyll the tone and management of the situation have been carefully adjusted to the ethical sentiment of the present time. The King, when he visits the Queen in the nunnery to which she has fled, promises that she shall be protected; he leaves men

> "To guard thee in the wild hour coming on,
> Lest but a hair of this low head be harm'd."

But he will never see her again —

> "I hold that man the worst of public foes
> Who either for his own or children's sake,
> To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife
> Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house.
> * * * * * * *
> Better the King's waste hearth and aching heart
> Than thou reseated in thy place of light,
> The mockery of my people, and their bane."

The unfortunate Queen, left alone, pours out her re-

morse at having preferred an ardent lover, the flower of chivalry, to her blameless King, whom she had once found too immaculate —

> "A moral child without the craft to rule,
> Else had he not lost me.
> * * * * * * *
> I thought I could not breathe in that fine air,
> That pure severity of perfect light.
> I yearned for warmth and colour, which I found
> In Lancelot."

Thus in Tennyson's poem we have the faithless wife and injured husband of our own society; a woman's agonised repentance and a man's stern justice that is neither hard nor unforgiving; we have the costumes, the scenery, and the *dramatis personæ* of the old romance with a change of feeling and manners. The result is, in the first place, that the excellent Arthur lacks tragic quality; he does not interest us sufficiently; while there is even something tame, from the dramatic point of view, in his high-minded generosity toward Guinevere. Secondly, to a mind prepossessed with the exactitude of modern taste, the scene between the King and Queen at Amesbury, notwithstanding its elevation of tone and austere purity of feeling, suggests something like a splendid anachronism, though as a moral lesson, nobly delivered, it has indisputable power and beauty. The poet is undoubtedly entitled to illustrate universal truths by striking off a new and powerful impression from the unchanging types of human character; yet those who have no great skill at deciphering the Hyponoia, the underlying significance of the Idylls, may be pardoned for confessing to a feeling of something remote, shadowy, and spectacular

in the company of these mediæval knights and dames, wizards and wantons, who pass over the stage and perform their parts before an audience whose deeper thoughts have long ceased to run in the vein of fantastic allegory. The unreality of the whole environment inevitably diminishes the dramatic effect.

The story of Tristram and La Belle Iseult,[1] which is perhaps the most beautifully pathetic in the whole cycle of Romance, stirring all hearts with sympathy for irresistible ill-fated passion, is left half told in Malory's Morte d'Arthur, though Lancelot alludes to Tristram's treacherous murder by King Mark. Nor has Tennyson, in his Idyll of the Last Tournament, availed himself of the supremely poetical ending of the old legend, when Tristram, mortally wounded, sends a messenger across the sea to bring Iseult of Cornwall, his first love, to Brittany. The returning vessel, when it comes within sight from the Breton shore, is to hoist a white sail if it is bringing Iseult, a black sail if she has refused to come. But Iseult of Brittany, his wife, tells him falsely that the vessel has been sighted with a black sail, whereupon Tristram, who had kept himself alive ["retenait sa vie"] until then, lets himself expire; and Iseult of Cornwall lands only to die of grief over his body. Here the dominant feeling is of pity and pardon for broken-hearted lovers, but in the Idyll of the Last Tournament Tristram's story has the conclusion of another and probably a later version, which is sudden and violent. King Mark, Arthur's antitype, is the suspicious and vindictive husband, who surprises Tristram with his wife, and kills him in the arms of Iseult; there is

[1] Or "Isoude."

here no allegory or romantic circumstance, but the sombre morality of a doom like that of Francesca da Rimini, of lovers whose fate melted even the austerity of Dante. One might wish that Tennyson had preferred the softer and more compassionate ending; the more so because the story of Tristram, lying with failing breath in his castle that overlooked the sea, and receiving his death stroke from the word brought him of the black sail, would have given ample scope for finely wrought descriptive poetry, and for touching the highest chords of emotion. Yet the Idyll tells its own story forcibly, without effort or exaggeration of language; the shadow of danger grows darker over the amorous discourse of Tristram and Iseult in her bower, where the reckless passion of the woman and the kindling desire of the man blind them to the impending calamity, until their lips meet —

"But, while he bow'd to kiss the jewell'd throat,
Out of the dark, just as the lips had touch'd,
Behind him rose a shadow and a shriek —
'Mark's way,' said Mark, and clove him through the brain."

The poem has several examples of Tennyson's singular skill in briefly sketching broad landscapes —

"But Arthur with a hundred spears
Rode far, till o'er the illimitable reed,
And many a glancing plash and sallowy isle,
The wide-wing'd sunset of the misty marsh
Glared on a huge machicolated tower."

Again —

"As the crest of some slow-arching wave,
Heard in dead night along that table-shore,
Drops flat, and after the great waters break
Whitening for half a league, and thin themselves,
Far over sands marbled with moon and cloud."

Or a single line may be the setting of a picture, as in

> "The long low dune and lazy plunging sea."

And in the Passing of Arthur, when the King is following Modred to the down by the seaside, where he is to fight the last "dim weird battle of the west," the poet again shows his power of fixing by a few strokes the impression of a desolate wilderness bounded by the sky-lines of mountain and sea.

> "Then rose the King and moved his host by night,
> And ever push'd Sir Modred, league by league,
> Back to the sunset bound of Lyonnesse —
> A land of old upheaven from the abyss
> By fire, to sink into the abyss again;
> Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,
> And the long mountains ended in a coast
> Of ever-shifting sand, and far away
> The phantom circle of a moaning sea."

In this Idyll, the last of the series, we have Tennyson's Morte d'Arthur fragment of 1842, reproduced with additions at the beginning and the end to carry on and wind up the epical narrative, and to point the moral intention. The fantastic folklore no longer disconcerts us, the final Act of the drama is purely heroic. We have a clear view of a noble ruler of his people, born out of his due time, who after striving to realise a lofty ideal of justice and humanity in a wild age, finds the whole fabric of his State ruined by domestic perfidy and armed rebellion, and marches full of doubt and despondency to the battle in which he is to fall and to disappear mysteriously.

> "For I, being simple, thought to work His will,
> And have but stricken with the sword in vain;

> And all whereon I lean'd in wife and friend
> Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm
> Reels back into the beast, and is no more.
> My God, Thou hast forgotten me in my death:
> Nay — God my Christ — I pass but shall not die."

The two armies meet, shrouded in a white mist by the seashore, in a stubborn fight, until

> "When the dolorous day
> Grew drearier toward twilight falling, came
> A bitter wind, clear from the North, and blew
> The mist aside, and with that wind the tide
> Rose, and the pale King glanced across the field
> Of battle: but no man was moving there."

He sees Modred, kills him with one last stroke, and falls all but slain. Then follows the well-known episode of the casting of his sword Excalibur into the mere, and the appearance of the dusky barge with the black-hooded Queens.

In no other part of the entire poem is the magic of the old romance so finely interfused with allegory as at the close of this Idyll, where patriotic courage and virtue are seen contending vainly against the powers of evil, against that adverse Fate, otherwise inexorable Circumstance, which is too strong for human endeavour, and shapes man's visible destiny. Just as neither valour, nor unflinching devotion to his city, nor nobility of character, could save Hector from death, or Andromache from bitter servitude, so against Arthur the hard facts of life must prevail, and he perishes with all his knights save one. His enchanted sword, the emblem of personal prowess, is thrown back to the water fairy as a sign that his warfare is ended; and

the three Queens with whom he sails away to the island-valley of Avilion may be, to those who seek for an inner meaning, symbolical of the angels who bear away to heaven the soul of a brave warrior. One may well believe that the Morte d'Arthur legend is, like the Chanson de Roland, the far-descended survival of a genuine tradition of some ancient battle, in which a renowned chief was defeated and slain with the flower of his fighting men. Roland, like Arthur, survives to the last; his dying effort is to break his sword Durandal, as Arthur's is to have Excalibur flung into the lake. But Durandal will not break, for there are holy relics in the hollow of the hilt; Roland confesses his sins, commends himself to God, and St. Michael and St. Gabriel take charge of his soul. We are here in the full atmosphere of Christian piety and the mediæval Church, uncoloured by that free myth-making imagination, the primitive semi-pagan element, which Tennyson has retained to give its charm and glamour to his verse. His poem closes, epically, with the vanishing of Arthur; though the prose chronicle goes on to relate how Lancelot bade farewell to Guinevere in her cloister, followed her funeral to Glastonbury, died there of grief at her tomb, and was buried in his castle of Joyous Garde, where Sir Ector finds men singing the dirge over him "full lamentably." There was good matter here for another Idyll, but the sequel might have disturbed the unity of Tennyson's plan; and moreover the doleful complaint of Sir Ector over Lancelot's body, with its piercing simplicity of words and feeling, rises so nearly to the highest level of heroic poetry — of such passages as Helen's lament over Hector's corpse in the Iliad — that even Tenny-

son's art could hardly have paraphrased it successfully.

If, after reading through the Idylls, we take up Enoch Arden, which followed them in 1864, the contrast of style and subject is again remarkable. This poem begins by the sketch of a little seaport on the East Anglian coast, with the nets, old boats, and ship timber strewed about the shore, and it winds on through the tale of a fisherman's homely joys and griefs, reminding us of Crabbe, without the quality of hard pathos which Tennyson found in him; for the tone is softer and there are more gleams of colour. Moreover, although the poet has done his best to lower the pitch of his instrument into harmony with a quiet unadorned narrative, yet he cannot refrain here and there from some effort in describing common things poetically. With Crabbe, a full fish-basket would not have been "ocean spoil in ocean-smelling osier"; nor would Enoch's face have been "rough-reddened with a thousand winter gales," when a hundred might have been overmuch for a sailor not thirty years old by the story. Nevertheless the opening lines have the concise plain-speaking of the Suffolk poet, with the same method of grouping details in the foreground of a picture; and with the difference that Tennyson widens his prospect, giving it distance and air by a sky-line —

> "Long lines of cliff breaking have left a chasm;
> And in the chasm are foam and yellow sands;
> Beyond, red roofs about a narrow wharf
> In cluster; then a moulder'd church; and higher
> A long street climbs to one tall-tower'd mill;

And high in heaven behind it a gray down
With Danish barrows. . . .
* * * * * * *
Here on this beach a hundred years ago,
Three children of three houses, Annie Lee,
The prettiest little damsel in the port,
And Philip Ray the miller's only son,
And Enoch Arden, a rough sailor's lad
Made orphan by a winter shipwreck, play'd
Among the waste and lumber of the shore,
Hard coils of cordage, swarthy fishing-nets,
Anchors of rusty fluke, and boats updrawn."

Enoch Arden marries, but is forced by stress of poverty to leave his wife and home on a distant voyage. It is when the sailor, escaping from shipwreck, lands alone on a tropical island, that the scene begins to glow, and the verses to fill with sound —

"He could not see the kindly human face,
Nor ever hear a kindly voice, but heard
The myriad shriek of wheeling ocean-fowl,
The league-long roller thundering on the reef,
The moving whisper of huge trees that branch'd
And blossom'd in the zenith."

And while he wanders under the glare of unclouded noonday amid palms and ferns, in the glittering heat of land and water, his mind's eye sees his English home far away —

"The chill
November dawns and dewy-glooming downs,
The gentle shower, the smell of dying leaves,
And the low moan of leaden-colour'd seas."

The tale is founded on an incident that must have been common enough in the foretime, particularly among seafaring people, when men wandered abroad and were lost, or found their way home after many

years, to be welcomed or disowned by their families as the case might be. It is the Odyssey of humble mariners, and many traces of it may be found in the folklore and in the superstitions of Asia as well as of Europe, where the forgotten husband is liable to be treated on his reappearance as a ghostly *revenant*, or even as a demon who has assumed a dead man's body in order to gain entrance into the house. In most of these stories, as in a rude English sea ballad that used to be well known, and in an old French song of the Breton coast, the Penelope of a small household has yielded to her suitors and married again as in Enoch Arden, and as in Crabbe's Tale of the Parting Hour, where the castaway mariner comes back to find his sweetheart an elderly widow. But in the ancient epic and also in these folk-tales the next step is for the husband to declare his identity and to demand his rights most vigorously, as Ulysses did, but as Enoch Arden does not. The popular ending, founded probably on real life, is that the man who has been supplanted in his absence finally accepts the situation and retires disconsolately, or, as in the novel of *Gil Blas*, philosophically. Tennyson has preferred, rightly for the purpose of his art, a conclusion of pathetic self-sacrifice; and Enoch, after one sight of his wife and children in a cheerful home, which is tenderly described, accepts oblivion, and resolves that they shall never discover him alive —

> "But if my children care to see me dead,
> Who hardly knew me living, let them come,
> I am their father; but she must not come,
> For my dead face would vex her after-life."

The poem has been dramatised in London and New

York, was translated into Latin, and into seven different European languages; while in France alone seven translations, most of them annotated, have been made; and Professor A. Beljame of the Paris University has written a most able study of the versification in Enoch Arden. It is indeed an excellent piece of work, which for sincerity of feeling, distinctness of outline, and restraint in language, may be matched with the poem of Dora; while by comparing it with Aylmer's Field, that appeared in the same volume, we can take a measure both of Tennyson's strength and of his imperfections in the delineation of contemporary life, outside the field of romance.

The story in Aylmer's Field runs upon the same theme as in Maude and Locksley Hall, with a variation of plot and circumstance. It reproduces the somewhat commonplace situation of two playmates, boy and girl, who fall in love with each other on reaching the age of indiscretion, whereupon the rich and haughty squire indignantly ejects the young man, breaking off the engagement, and breaking his daughter's heart in consequence. The lover kills himself, and his brother, the parish clergyman, takes the whole miserable affair as his text for a sermon that denounces the idols of wealth and pedigree, and shows God's punishment upon worldly pride. It might be wished that Tennyson, whose special talent did not lie in wielding the scourge, should have perceived that extreme condemnation of this particular kind of social injustice is liable to take a false air of sentiment which embarrasses the impressive treatment of the situation in poetry.

> "Sir Aylmer Aylmer, that almighty man,
> The county God,"

is too conventional a figure, obviously magnified, and has served too long under novel-writers, to be promoted into the upper rank of poetical characters; and it is ineffectual to write him down "insolent, brainless, heartless . . . an old pheasant lord and partridge breeder," for the lash falls in vain on the back of a callous society, to whom worldly considerations for Sir Aylmer's motives, if not for his manners, appeal with some extenuating force; and who might rejoin that the Lord of Burleigh's marriage with a lowly maiden turned out unhappily. Nor is the morality of the story indisputable. Is Sir Aylmer's iniquity so deep as to justify a poet in bringing down the wrath of God upon his head, desolation upon his house, the dilapidation of his ancient hall, and the extinction of his family?

> "The man became
> Imbecile; his one word was 'desolate';
> Dead for two years before his death was he:
> * * * * * * *
> Then the great Hall was wholly broken down,
> And the broad woodland parcell'd into farms;
> And where the two contrived their daughter's good,
> Lies the hawk's cast, the mole has made his run,
> * * * * * * *
> The slow-worm creeps, and the thin weasel there
> Follows the mouse, and all is open field."

Purse-pride and the infatuation of social prejudice are not sins dark enough for such a tremendous Nemesis; they fall rather within the jurisdiction of the contemptuous satirist, who can sometimes hit the mark in one cutting sentence, as when Swift says that you can tell what God thinks of wealth by noticing the kind of people on whom He thinks fit to bestow it.

CHAPTER V

PASTORALS; TENNYSON'S PHILOSOPHY

Let us turn to another aspect of English life; for, if his studies from the antique be excepted, no great English poet has travelled for his subjects more rarely beyond his native land than Tennyson. In such poems of rural scenery and character as The May Queen and The Grandmother, we have the annals of the village, in youth and age, told with a sweet and serious feeling, in flowing monosyllabic lines that affect and captivate a reader by their freedom from varnishing or emphasis. Their composition has not the unconscious simplicity of Auld Robin Gray, where the resemblance to a genuine ballad comes from that absence of colouring adjectives [there is but one in all the eight stanzas] which is the note of all primitive and popular verse — a woodnote wild that is very seldom caught and domesticated by elaborate culture. Tennyson's genius was essentially cultivated and picturesque; he laid on his tints with the artistic design of illuminating the beauty of quiet nature, or he filled in with descriptive particulars in order to produce the scene's general impression, as in the following stanza: —

"When the flowers come again, mother, beneath the waning light
You'll never see me more in the long gray fields at night;

> When from the dry dark wold the summer airs blow cool
> On the oat-grass and the sword-grass, and the bulrush in the pool,"

which is in a style quite different from that of unlettered verse-makers.

Yet the plaintive lament of the May Queen for her doom of early death, and the sadness of old age recalling the memories of youth, are presented with a truth and earnestness that touch universal human affections and the sense of mortality; and the language is purely poetical, with the same exclusion of dialect or imitation of rustic talk that is seen in all Wordsworth's pastorals. These poems of Tennyson aim at, and do not fall far short of, the "simplicity of diction" which Wordsworth affirmed that he had introduced into English verse as the proper medium for rendering the elementary feelings of the country-folk and showing the poetical aspect of common things. Wordsworth's principle, as explained in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, was to choose incidents and situations of rural life, and to describe them as far as possible in the language really used by the people, purified, indeed, from grossness and uncouth provincialisms. Good prose, he maintained, was the proper vehicle for this kind of poetry: his object was to clothe the thoughts and characters in plain close-fitting words, adapting the speech to the situation. It was not difficult for Coleridge to prove, in the well-known criticism that is to be found in his *Biographia Literaria*, that language so purified was very different from the true vulgar tongue; that Wordsworth, in fact, used good plain English vivified and elevated poetically, and was at his worst in the lines which come nearest to commonplace rustic

conversation. Moreover, Wordsworth, though he did good service in discarding finally the old conventional pastoral, diverged habitually into philosophic reflections that were manifestly and intentionally out of keeping with his rustic characters. In the two poems of The May Queen and The Grandmother Tennyson makes no pretence of imitating the language of his villagers; his object is to translate their genuine feelings poetically; he simplifies his diction and strips it of superfluous ornament; but no man knew better that real idiomatic vernacular is a very different thing. What this is, and the use that can be made of it, he has shown separately. He does not relate a story and moralise upon it, as Wordsworth usually did; he exhibits dramatic impersonations that portray the homely joys and griefs of the peasantry, that show how they act and what they say, in language that is nevertheless refined, correct, and vivid, and in a style which is the poet's own.

It will perhaps be admitted that this method of leaving his personages to speak for themselves was a novelty in the lyrics of rusticity. In subsequent poems Tennyson went one step further in compliance with the modern demand for what is called realism, by trying the bold experiment, upon which neither Wordsworth nor even Crabbe ever ventured, of making them speak in their own rough unpolished vernacular, as if they were acting their parts on a stage. This was the final death-blow to the tradition of the elegant pastoral. We have to remember that Burns was the first poet of genius who proved that the strenuous racy speech of the people contained elements of high poetic value, being of course led to the discovery by the fact that it

lay ready to his hand, for he himself was a poet born and bred up among the Scottish peasantry. In Scotland, as in the New England of America, there existed a true and widespread provincial dialect, which gave a national flavour and local associations to verses in which it was used; but in England, the home of ancient literary culture, the writing of verse in dialect or patois had never hitherto been attempted by any of the recognised poets (and they are numerous) who have condescended to the short and simple annals of the village.[1] That Tennyson, the mystical romancer, the dreamer of fair women, should also have written spirited verses full of rude and quaint humour, sometimes even too redolent of the soil, is a notable example of his versatility. And his Northern Farmer set the fashion, in England, of drawing character-sketches in rough-hewn verse that imitates not only the speech but the accent of all sorts and conditions of unsophisticated men. It is a form of metrical composition that has lately spread, as a species of modern ballad, throughout the British Empire and the United States of America, but has little or no existence in any language except the English.[2]

FitzGerald, after reading the "Holy Grail," writes (1870) to Tennyson —

"The whole myth of Arthur's Round Table Dynasty in Britain presents itself before me with a sort of cloudy, Stonehenge grandeur. I am not sure if the old Knight's adventures

[1] William Barnes, who first published his poems in the Dorsetshire dialect in 1833, can hardly be ranked among the higher poets.

[2] Such poems as those of Mistral in the *Provençal* dialect belong, I think, to a different order.

do not tell upon me better, touched in some lyrical way (like your own 'Lady of Shalott'), than when elaborated into epic form. . . . Anyhow, Alfred, while I feel how pure, noble, and holy your work is, and whole phrases, lines, and sentences of it will abide with me, and, I am sure, with men after me, I read on till the 'Lincolnshire Farmer' drew tears to my eyes. I was got back to the substantial rough-spun Nature I knew; and the old brute, invested by you with the solemn humour of Humanity, like Shakespeare's *Shallow*, became a more pathetic phenomenon than the knights who revisit the world in your other verse."

In the two poems of the Northern Farmer, indeed, we have verisimilitude of portraiture and authentic delineation of character, preserving the type and developing its peculiar features by the insight that belongs to the observing faculty, with artistic fidelity in details. Yet the treatment of these subjects needs much discrimination and reserve; for unless there is a solid foundation of point and humour, the dialect becomes mere jargon; and the particulars must never be *too* inelegant, nor must the verse be overcrowded with phonetic pronunciations. The Northern Cobbler, which betrays defects of this kind, must be ranked, critically, below the Farmer; and the Village Wife has a certain triviality of voluble talk which may be true enough to nature, but hardly supports her claim to a niche in a poetic gallery of national portraits.

"'Ouse-keeper sent tha, my lass, fur New Squire coom'd last night.
Butter an' heggs — yis — yis. I'll goä wi' tha back; all right;
Butter I warrants be prime, an' I warrants the heggs be as well,
Hafe a pint o' milk runs out when ya breäks the shell."

Take away the queer spelling, and turn the lines into ordinary English, and you have commonplace domestic prose hardly worth putting into rhyme. By the same test The Spinster's Sweet-'Arts must be reckoned among the less successful excursions into the field of low life, for even there it is dangerous to descend among ignoble particulars, and the Art of Sinking consists in avoiding degradation —

"To be horder'd about, an' waäked, when Molly'd put out the light,
By a man coomin' in wi' a hiccup at ony hour o' the night!
An' the taäble staäin'd wi' 'is aäle, an' the mud o' 'is boots o' the stairs,
An' the stink o' 'is pipe i' the 'ouse, an' the mark o' 'is 'eäd o' the chairs!"

"Roden Noel," writes Tennyson, "calls the two Northern Farmers photography; but I call them imaginative" — as of course they are, being far above mere exact presentations of individuals. And in proportion as photography, the bare indifferent printing off of things as they are, predominates in this kind of work, it becomes no fit business for a master of poetical grace and distinction. Here, again, we may refer to Coleridge's criticism on Wordsworth's Preface, where he (Wordsworth) explains that he has chosen low and rustic subjects, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language. To this Coleridge replies that low and rustic life is in itself unpoetic, and that poetry must idealise. Where Wordsworth does idealise, he says, his figures have the representative quality; where the poet goes too

close to the real native product, as in the "Idiot Boy," he becomes commonplace; and when he describes a dull and garrulous man exactly, he becomes himself dull. So, also, when Tennyson gives us the vulgar tongue in its full flavour, the poetical element is overpowered and disappears.

But if it must be admitted that passages like these are blemishes on the picture, "in truth to nature missing truth to art," we may regard them as an overbalance of Tennyson's proclivities, as lapses on the side to which his genius leans. Throughout his poetry, from the highest to the humblest subject, runs a vivid objectivity; he sees things in strong relief, and they are impressed with a sharp edge upon a very receptive mind. Even at the times when he is dropping his plummet into the abyss of the mysteries that encompass human existence and destiny, he rarely carries abstract thought to any depth; he returns to the surface and refreshes himself among the forms of the visible world. Here he is in his proper domain, in his power of exact delineation, of recording briefly the sensation received and retained, by looking (for example) attentively at a wide prospect, and taking out of it the suggestion or the similitudes, reading from it the language or discourse of Nature. And as in his best work he takes accurate notice of minor things, of wild flowers and foliage, of a weasel's faint cry or a bird's call, or even of a cow's wrinkled throat in the play of sunlight, so when he is giving us the rough side of life he has occasionally fallen into excess of naturalism by his propensity for minute observation of things that will not bear inspecting too closely.

Yet his pre-eminent gift was for the imaginative apprehension of beauty, and his practice is exemplified in the record of his journeys. In 1860, for example, he made an excursion to Cornwall and the Scilly Islands, gathering a harvest of impressions from the views of the coast, the cliffs, the long curving sweep of the sandy shore, the towering Atlantic breakers, and jotting down the "nature-similes," which, being afterwards grafted into his verse, became the decorative framework that contained and gave a local habitation to his Arthurian legends. Then he returned to Farringford, with its careless ordered garden close to the edge of a noble down, where his friends visited him, and listened to his table talk, and heard him read his poems. In 1861 he was in Auvergne, surveying, for the most part silently, the mountains, lakes, and torrents; whence the party travelled southward to the Pyrenees, meeting Arthur Clough at Luchon, with continual additions throughout the journey to the poetic sketch-book. He could thus fix in a few words the sensations of the moment, fresh and distinct, storing them for eventual use either descriptively, as part of a narrative, or as metaphors to expand and give forms to a thought. It may be noticed, by the way, that the most famous of Tennyson's contemporary poets in France worked by precisely the same method. Victor Hugo's "Couchers du Soleil" are careful studies from nature of the tones and forms of a landscape under the setting sun. Both these great artists sought to fix accurately the scene, and to translate the momentary sensation into accordance with the thought that it awakened, to use it as the background or environment of human action,

or merely to obtain a fresh image for the poetic embodiment of an idea, in substitution for images that have been worn out or become obsolete by long usage. Metaphor lies at the base of all language; and while the first man who spoke of running water conveyed his thought by an image which invested the stream with a being like his own, the poets latterly resorted to metaphor, or to myth — which is in their hands metaphor personified — as a mere repertory for figurative expression. When the thought at once strikes out the image, it comes fresher from the mint than when the image has been noted and treasured up beforehand for illustration of thought or action. It may be observed that Tennyson never uses what may be called the mythological device; he never appeals directly to the ocean or the mountain as if it were a living embodiment of Nature, as Byron does; he absorbs and translates the impress of inanimate things upon the perceptive mind. A year later we find him making similar studies for his poetry from the crags and dismantled castles of Derbyshire and Yorkshire. It would seem that his wandering in the quiet familiar scenery of England served him best in this way; since, if we may judge from a letter written immediately after his return from abroad, his reminiscences of a journey through France were troubled by a kind of resentment against the annoyances that never failed to discompose him in strange lands, and which in this instance appear to have affected his health.

"France, I believe, overset me, and more especially the foul ways and unhappy diet of that charming Auvergne; no

amount of granite craters or chestnut-woods, or lava-streams, not the Puy de Dôme which I climbed, nor the glen of Royat where I lived, nor the still more magnificent view of the dead volcanoes from the ascent to Mont Dore could make amends for those drawbacks; so we all fell sick by turns. . . . I remain with a torpid liver, not having much pleasure in anything."[1]

Nevertheless the course and circumstances of Tennyson's middle life were singularly untroubled and uneventful, leaving few turning-points or landmarks for the biographer. From straitened means in youth he had now passed to comparative affluence and the serenity of a well-ordered home; from distinction within a circle of choice friends to celebrity and eminence among the poets of his century. At Farringford, though his hours of work and meditation were properly set apart, his life was by no means secluded. He had many visitors and guests to whom he dispensed hospitality, and with them held the free discourse and interchange of ideas that reveal a man's character and opinions. His natural disposition was toward reserve and toward a certain taciturnity, that probably came from the habit of reflection and of fastidiousness in the choice of phrase; he spoke with intervals of silence.

After this manner the record of Tennyson's life runs in a dignified tranquillity, varied only by incidents that attest his established and spreading reputation as an illustrious man of letters, known by all Englishmen, and whose acquaintance was desired by distinguished foreign visitors to his country. In 1864 he received at Farringford Garibaldi, who planted a tree in the garden, and discoursed with him on Italian poetry.

[1] *Memoir.*

He writes to the Duke of Argyll: "What a noble human being! I expected to see a hero, and was not disappointed. When I asked if he returned through France, he said he would never set foot on the soil of France again. I happened to make use of the expression, 'That fatal debt of gratitude owed by Italy to Napoleon.' 'Gratitude,' he said; 'hasn't he had his pay, his reward? If Napoleon were dead, I should be glad; and if I were dead, he would be glad.'"[1] And yet there was prophetic truth in Tennyson's words, though not as he meant them; for the debt proved fatal, not to Italy, but to Napoleon, whose attachment to the cause of Italian liberty drew him into fatal complications that hampered all his foreign policy and contributed to his eventual downfall. The Longfellows from America, Professor Owen, Queen Emma of the Sandwich Islands, the son of the Abyssinian King Theodore, who lost life and kingdom in his war with the English, and Mr. Darwin—to whom Tennyson said, "Your theory of Evolution does not make against Christianity?" and Darwin answered, "No, certainly not"—may be mentioned to exemplify the variety of his visitors. We have a journal of a tour to Waterloo, with a careful survey of the battlefield, and thence to Weimar, where the party saw Goethe's house, with all his old boots at the entrance, and Goethe's coffin at the Fürstengruft. Tennyson joined, as might have been expected, the Committee for the defence of Governor Eyre, whose figure as the saviour of Jamaica struck the hardy temper of the English people, bringing out their unfailing readiness to pardon doing too much a great deal more easily than doing too little in

[1] *Memoir.*

a sharp emergency, and to be amazingly indulgent as to the methods employed.

In 1867 Tennyson was in negotiation for the land on Blackdown in Surrey, where he afterwards built Aldworth, on a site accessible only by a rough track across the sandy plateau of the down from the lanes above Haslemere; placing the house on a sheltered ledge of the uppermost part of the hill's slope southward, with a broad view over the Sussex weald to the South Downs and the sea, and Leith Hill standing out on the eastern horizon. Then in 1868–69 he went abroad with Mr. Frederick Locker, who has left notes on the philosophic discourse, always so attractive to Tennyson, that throws many side-lights on his poetry. Some of these reminiscences show his mystical propensity, the habit of ruminating indecisively over speculations which understand all visible things to be signs and shadows of things invisible, the intimations of eternal Power and Divinity.[1] His thoughts also ran upon the limited range of our sense-perceptions, and the relativity of our ideas to our ignorance, on Faith transcending the bounds of Reason, and on his own firm belief in Love, Virtue, and Duty. His mind wavered thus over the face of the deep waters, returning always to the solid ground of human affections and moral obligations, in accordance with the advice of Socrates, that where certainty is unattainable one should take the best and most irrefragable of human notions, and let this be the raft upon which life's voyage is to be made.

A few lines may be subjoined from the same notes,

[1] St. Paul, *Romans* i. 20.

to show the lighter side of Tennyson's character, so well known to all who had the privilege of his acquaintance.

"Balzac's remark that 'Dans tout homme de génie il y a un enfant,' may find its illustration in Tennyson. He is the only grown-up human being that I know of who habitually thinks aloud. His humour is of the dryest, it is admirable. . . . He tells a story excellently, and has a catching laugh. There are people who laugh because they are shy or disconcerted, or for lack of ideas . . . only a few because they are happy or amused, or perhaps triumphant. Tennyson has an entirely natural and a very kindly laugh."[1]

It was, indeed, this vein of simplicity, unsophisticated by conventionality, that often gave unexpected turns to his humour, while it had much to do with preserving that keen sense, or even enjoyment, of ludicrous incongruities, of the comic effects of indecorum or unconscious vulgarity, which he himself once noticed in Shakespeare. If his laugh was triumphant, it was from that sudden glory which Hobbes defines to be the cause of laughter at human imperfections; though no one was further above ill-natured scorn than Tennyson, or less prone to harsh judgment upon the ordinary follies and eccentricities of men.

It may be permissible, for the purpose of collating the impressions made by Tennyson on those who knew him well and saw him often about this time, to add here an extract from some recollections of his conversation that have been left by Mr. F. Palgrave —

"Every one will have seen men, distinguished in some line of work, whose conversation (to take the old figure) either 'smelt too strongly of the lamp,' or lay quite apart from their art and craft. What, through all these years, struck me about Tennyson, was that whilst he never deviated into poetical

[1] *Memoir.*

language as such, whether in rhetoric or highly-coloured phrase, yet throughout the substance of his talk the same mode of thought, the same imaginative grasp of nature, the same fineness and gentleness in his view of character, the same forbearance and toleration, the *aurea mediocritas* despised by fools and fanatics, which are stamped on his poetry, were constantly perceptible; whilst in the easy and, as it were, unsought choiceness, the conscientious and truth-loving precision of his words, the same personal identity revealed itself."[1]

Here we have the large serenity of a poet in whom years are strengthening his philosophy of everyday life, while he was constantly pondering upon the mysteries which encompass all phenomenal existence. In the autumn of 1868, as we learn from a note prefixed by the editor of the *Nineteenth Century* review to an article, Tennyson and the Rev. Charles Pritchard were the guests of Mr. James Knowles; and as the conversation had frequently turned on speculative subjects, it was suggested that a society might be formed "to discuss such questions after the manner and with the freedom of an ordinary scientific society." This proposal was acted upon, with the result that some of the leading representatives of theological opinion, scientific research, and philosophic interest came together in the Metaphysical Society, of which Mr. Leslie Stephen has observed that four out of five of its members knew nothing of metaphysics. We learn from Mr. Knowles that the plan came first to be set on foot entirely through Tennyson's adhesion to it; and although during the society's existence of twelve years his attendance was infrequent — while he usually listened silently to the debates — one may guess that the papers read or discussed on problems that had always

[1] *Memoir.*

occupied his mind must have increased their attraction for him, and may have influenced the philosophic drift of his subsequent poetry. His poem on The Higher Pantheism, which he sent to be read before the Society, maintains the personality of God apart from the visible world, regarding spiritual beings as somehow incompatible with matter. The pure Pantheistic idea is a conception of universal Divine immanence, of the infinite interpenetrating the finite; but this might be held to exclude the notion of the world's moral government. And Tennyson's Higher Pantheism seems to aim at preserving the consciousness of a discrimination between infinite intelligence and the mind, whose perception of the finite world involves, or perhaps necessitates, a recognition of infinity beyond —

"The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills and the plains —
Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him who reigns?

* * * * * * *

Earth, these solid stars, this weight of body and limb,
Are they not sign and symbol of thy division from Him?"

The soul has broken glimpses of the Divine vision; and the concluding lines —

"And the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye of man cannot see;
But if we could see and hear, this Vision — were it not He?"

might be interpreted as leading up to the doctrine of Oriental theosophy — that only by escaping from sensation, by liberation from the bodily organs, can the soul attain clear knowledge of or unity with the Divine Being.

We know from Tennyson's earlier writings that a shadow of despondency and gloom, a sense of the incompleteness and failures of life, darkened his meditations on the condition and prospects of the human race; and his later poems show that he long retained this cloudy outlook upon the world. In 1864 he wrote an unpublished epigram upon "Immeasurable Sadness"; and if a collection were made of his dramatic monologues (which would be well worth doing), we should find that as time went on he dwelt more and more on the unhappiness of mankind. In Locksley Hall and Maud we had the vague dispirited murmuring of youth against the world's hard discipline; but we also had the lyrics of youthful ardour, love, and beauty. In the pastorals we have had the quiet joys and sorrows of the country folk. In his latter-day monologues the tragic view of things appears to spread and deepen; not vague discontent, but actual misery and anguish are his themes; the agony of Rizpah; the remorse, in The Wreck, of one who deserted her husband and lost her child; the vain repentance, in The First Quarrel, of a widow who parted with her husband in foolish anger —

"An' the wind began to rise, an' I thought of him out at sea,
An' I felt I had been to blame; he was always kind to me.
'Wait a little, my lass, I am sure it 'ill all come right' —
An' the boat went down that night — the boat went down that night."

The Children's Hospital is full of pain and tears; while in Despair we have the fury of a man half crazed by misfortune, who has been resuscitated after trying to drown himself. Instead of depicting a mood, a reverie, or a type of character, he now takes

up a striking anecdote of actual crime or suffering, and gives full play to his keen sensibility by a dramatic impersonation of the strongest emotions. The most poignant situation, more powerfully rendered than any other, is in Rizpah, where a mother has gathered up the fleshless bones of her son who has been hanged in chains for a robbery, and she hears the night-wind bring down his piteous cries to her: —

"Wailing, wailing, wailing, the wind over land and sea —
And Willy's voice in the wind — 'O mother, come out to me.'
Why should he call me to-night, when he knows that I cannot go?
For the downs are as bright as day, and the full moon stares at the snow.

"We should be seen, my dear; they would spy us out of the town.
The loud black nights for us, and the storm rushing over the down,
When I cannot see my own hand, but am led by the creak of the chain,
And grovel and grope for my son till I find myself drenched with the rain."

It is a cruel story, barely fit for poetry, since the simple facts are so heartrending as to leave little scope for imaginative execution. Yet the long moaning lines have the sound of misery; the details are worked up with unflinching precision; and the sensation of utter grief, beyond all comfort or cure, is very forcibly conveyed. For a comparison of style, between the elaborate and the primitive, we may turn to the tale of Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, told in the ancient chronicle with all the power of a few plain words, without ornament or commentary; a sight as it was

seen on the Syrian hills, when the seven sons of Saul were hanged in propitiation of divine wrath, to stay the famine.

If we may now endeavour to sketch out some general view of Tennyson's attitude toward the great problems of human existence, it becomes necessary to read together, in this connection, the poems that he published at different times in his later years. In Tennyson's Rizpah we have a helpless woman crushed by a calamity that she could not avert; our compassion for her is unqualified. In Despair, on the other hand, we have a case of mental pathology; we are back again among intellectual difficulties: we have to consider the ethics of the situation, and to suspend our sympathy until we can satisfy ourselves that a man deserves it who would fling away his own life and his wife's because he has lost faith in God, is miserable in this world, and expects nothing from the world to come: —

"He is only a cloud and a smoke who was once a pillar of fire,
The guess of a worm in the dust and the shadow of its desire —
Of a worm as it writhes in a world of the weak trodden down by the strong,
Of a dying worm in a world, all massacre, murder, and wrong."

Here indeed we have the lyric of despair, and the force of language has been strained to its uttermost pitch in expressing it. Yet we are not so carried away by the rush of the daring verse as to read without impatience the violent railing against all things human and divine by which this poor fellow seeks to excuse a somewhat abject surrender to misfortune and

materialism. Self-respect and the stoical temper unite to disown his behaviour; and the stress laid throughout the poem on the disastrous consequences of unbelief creates a suspicion that these frenzied denunciations are delivered with an eye on an audience; for the desperate half-drowned man makes shrewd hits at infidel science and strikes out against Calvinistic Theology.

"What! I should call on that Infinite Love that has served us so well?
Infinite cruelty rather that made everlasting Hell,
Made us, foreknew us, foredoom'd us, and does what he will with his own;
Better our dead brute mother who never has heard us groan."

An argumentative intention underlies the rhapsody, weakens the logic of the situation, and produces a sense of dramatic insincerity. In one single line by Keats, "Here, where men sit and hear each other groan," there is a deeper echo of human misery than in all this declamation, which belongs rather to the preacher than to the poet. But it reflects the shade of alarm that seems to have continually darkened Tennyson's mind when he brooded over subjects of this kind. In religion he was an optimist, holding a firm belief in the divine wisdom and goodness; though the aspect and course of Nature appears to have alternately encouraged and disheartened him; her calm beauty was seen to cover unmerciful indifference; and formal theology brought him no consolation. His imagination was haunted by a fear that scientific teaching would extinguish belief in a spiritual life to come, and would leave mankind desolate in a vast universe. One evening, we are told in the *Memoir*,

"he was talking on death, and quoting a Parisian story of a man having deliberately ordered and eaten a good dinner, and having afterwards committed suicide by covering his face with a chloroformed handkerchief. 'That's what I should do,' he said, 'if I thought there was no future life.'"

The remark, though recorded, can hardly have been made seriously; but it contains in essence the sentiment of his poem Despair, the sombre conception of pessimism as almost a justification of suicide. Unless the miserable condition of the masses can be improved — if want, unhappiness, and squalor are ineradicable, as they seem to be — the world, for the greater number of mankind, may as well end at once instead of rolling on through immense periods. And even if we are gradually advancing to a higher and happier life for all, what is the use of Progress if its end is to be a final extinction of all animated existence upon this planet? These are the two currents of thought that appear to have perplexed Tennyson's meditations, and to run through such poems as Despair, and through Locksley Hall Sixty Years After[1] —

"Is it well that while we range with Science, glorying in the Time,
City children soak and blacken soul and sense in city slime?

"There among the glooming alleys Progress halts on palsied feet,
Crime and hunger cast our maidens by the thousand on the street."

And he still harps, in the same poem, on his feeling of the inutility of human effort, on his fear lest the dominion of science should deaden our spiritual aspira-

[1] 1887.

tions; he reminds us that our transitory existence in time is little worth, that progress and human perfectibility are illusions, and the world's history a tale of unmeaning bustle and agitation, signifying nothing, unless we keep alive the spiritual instincts and the hope of immortality —

"Truth, for Truth is Truth, he worshipt, being true as he was brave;
Good, for Good is Good, he follow'd, yet he look'd beyond the grave,

"Wiser there than you, that crowning barren Death as lord of all,
Deem this over-tragic drama's closing curtain is the pall!

* * * * * * *

"Gone for ever! Ever? no — for since our dying race began,
Ever, ever, and for ever was the leading light of man.

* * * * * * *

"Truth for truth, and good for good! The Good, the True, the Pure, the Just —
Take the charm 'For ever' from them, and they crumble into dust."

The stanzas have the rhythmic swell and regular fall of a chant by some prophetic seer looking backward and forward over the procession of ages, the spectator of all time and all existence, who distrusts the advance of civilisation, disdains mere physical betterment, and foretells dire conflicts in which the nobler qualities of man may perish in strife against misrule and sensuality. Toward the end comes a gentler and more hopeful note; yet the burden of the poem is still, as with In Memoriam, the oppressive immensity of space and time, in which religions and philosophic systems are lost like planks in an ocean, and those who cling to them are tossed about until they drop into the depths —

"Forward, backward, backward, forward, in the immeasurable sea,
Sway'd by vaster ebbs and flows than can be known to you or me.

"All the suns — are these but symbols of innumerable man,
Man or Mind that sees a shadow of the planner or the plan?

* * * * * * *

"What are men that He should heed us? cried the king of sacred song;
Insects of an hour, that hourly work their brother insect wrong,

"While the silent Heavens roll, and Suns along their fiery way,
All their planets whirling round them, flash a million miles a day.

"Many an Æon moulded earth before her highest, man, was born,
Many an Æon too may pass when earth is manless and forlorn."

Among these illimitable periods a life of seventy or eighty years is as nothing, and human efforts and aspirations sink into insignificance; yet the old squire has the consolation that it is something to have had one's day, to have shared the lot of mankind and to have helped one's neighbours, and to stand at life's close in the old house, which is full of early memories of joy and sorrow. And so falls the curtain on Locksley Hall, the conclusion of a romantic drama that runs in a fragmentary way through so many of Tennyson's poems. If we connect the scattered links, we have the conception of fretful youth with ardent hopes and ambitions, of a passionate attachment that is broken off rudely and violently, of revolt against social injustice, of long wrestling with the spectres

of intellectual doubt and depression, of gradual schooling under the world's hard discipline, and of an old age passing quietly amid the scenes of boyhood, still troubled by the unintelligible enigma of the Universe, but with a softened retrospect over the past, and with such resignation as may be got from trusting that the immeasurable course of Evolution may tend to some far distant state of rest and happiness.

In Vastness [1] the figure of individual man has disappeared, and we have the same gloomy panorama of human energy and suffering contemplated from the point of its utter vanity and nothingness. The full organ-notes reverberate in lines that touch the highest scale of sublimity and grandeur in Tennyson's verse; but the poem is too heavily charged with contrasted images, and the light is too lurid —

"Raving politics, never at rest — as this poor earth's pale history runs, —
What is it all but a trouble of ants in the gleam of a million million of suns?
* * * * * * *
"What the philosophies, all the sciences, poesy, varying voices of prayer?
All that is noblest, all that is basest, all that is filthy with all that is fair?

"What is it all, if we all of us end but in being our own corpse-coffins at last,
Swallow'd in Vastness, lost in Silence, drown'd in the deeps of a meaningless past?"

The feeling that man is but dust and shadow, animated for a brief moment, that he is born to sorrow, and

[1] 1889.

that his works perish, is primeval in poetry and in religion; the starry heavens suggested it to the ancient sages and preachers no less vividly than all the discoveries of astronomy and geology. They confronted the eternal silences mournfully, yet with tranquil intrepidity; they drew lessons of composure and ethical fortitude from the spectacle; they used it to rebuke cowardly fear and superstition. In the East they relied upon the soul's gradual emancipation until it should escape into immateriality from the demon that afflicts it with sensation. If the modern poet's imagination appears more overpowered by alarm, by a kind of terror lest the mainsprings of our moral and spiritual activities should give way, we have to consider that the tremendous expansion of the scientific record in these latter days seems to have affected Tennyson like a sentence of inflexible predestination, overshadowing his delight in the world's glories by a foreknowledge of its inevitable doom. The vision which unrolled itself before his imagination, of the blind mechanical evolution of a world "dark with griefs and graves," of human energy squandered on a planet that is passing from fire to frost, evidently fascinated his mind more and more, and possessed it with dismay. That mankind and their works must perish, slowly or suddenly, leaving not a wrack behind, has been the warning of all religions, the foundation of all beliefs in a future life; and the poem of Vastness gives the same warning in the terms of science, but without the same clear note of intrepidity, or of confidence in revealed promises. Yet Tennyson has his antidote to Despair. Amid the general shipwreck of positive creeds, formal theologies, political and philosophic

systems, all of them powerless to affect man's ultimate destiny, we have gleams of spiritual illumination seen on the far-distant horizon; we have a profound faith in the moral direction of cosmic laws, in a spiritual basis of all being, in a kinship and affinity between the spiritual element in man and the divine soul which moves the whole universe. He believes with Coleridge that the world of sense is in some manner the manifestation of supersensual realities. That Love is stronger than Death, and in some form or feeling will survive it, is the idea that was expressed in some of the most musical and melancholy stanzas of "In Memoriam" —

"Yet if some voice that man could trust
Should murmur from the narrow house,
'The cheeks drop in; the body bows;
Man dies: nor is there hope in dust:'

"Might I not say? 'Yet even here,
But for one hour, O Love, I strive
To keep so sweet a thing alive:'
But I should turn mine ears and hear

"The moanings of the homeless sea,
The sound of streams that swift or slow
Draw down Æonian hills, and sow
The dust of continents to be;

"And Love would answer with a sigh,
'The sound of that forgetful shore
Will change my sweetness more and more,
Half-dead to know that I shall die.'

"O me, what profits it to put
An idle case? If Death were seen
At first as Death, Love had not been,
Or been in narrowest working shut."

And in Akbar's Dream,[1] written many years afterward, we have the mystic's invocation of Allah as the Sun of Love —

> "But dimly seen
> Here, till the mortal morning mists of earth
> Fade in the noon of heaven, when creed and race
> Shall bear false witness, each of each, no more,
> But find their limits by the larger light,
> And overstep them, moving easily
> Thro' after-ages in the love of Truth,
> The truth of Love."

He believes that the deepest human affections are signs and symbols of our participation in something divine.

The Ancient Sage, another poem that appeared toward the close of Tennyson's life, is perhaps the least indefinite exposition of his hopeful philosophy. He touches here upon the conviction, so prevalent in Oriental mysticism, that the entire phantasmagoria of sense perception is essentially deceptive and unsubstantial, an illusion that will vanish with nearer and clearer apprehension of the Divine Presence which sustains the whole system of being —

> "If the Nameless should withdraw from all
> Thy frailty counts most real, all thy world
> Might vanish like thy shadow in the dark."

We are now in darkness, but larger knowledge may come —

> "And we, the poor earth's dying race, and yet
> No phantoms, watching from a phantom shore
> Await the last and largest sense to make
> The phantom walls of this illusion fade,
> And show us that the world is wholly fair."

The faint recollections that flit through the brain

[1] 1892.

in childhood are described in lines which have all Tennyson's delicate susceptibility to the lightest impressions of the eye or ear —

> "The first gray streak of earliest summer-dawn,
> The last long stripe of waning crimson gloom,
> As if the late and early were but one —
> A height, a broken grange, a grove, a flower
> Had murmurs 'Lost and gone and lost and gone!'
> A breath, a whisper — some divine farewell —
> Desolate sweetness — far and far away."

It may be a world of flitting shadows, yet there is work to be done, and light beyond —

> "Let be thy wail, and help thy fellow men."

Amid the scenes of lust and luxury, which chain down the soul —

> "Look higher, then — perchance — thou mayest — beyond
> A hundred ever-rising mountain lines
> And past the range of Night and Shadow — see
> The high-heaven dawn of more than mortal day
> Strike on the Mount of Vision."

There is hesitation in the Sage's accents; and the poet can do little more than enjoin us to follow the gleams of light that pierce the clouds which envelop our mortal existence. Science threatens to keep us wandering in an interminable labyrinth. Yet Science may be a symbolical language shadowing forth divine truths, a cypher by which those who have the key may read, in glimpses and occasional rays of light, a message of secret encouragement; and Evolution, a theory of futile transformations in the physical order, may be typical of the upward striving and gradual emancipation of man as a spiritual being. Some such

conclusions as these we can extract and piece together from Tennyson's later meditations; and if they are not always distinct and coherent, we have to remember that systematic philosophy lies outside the proper range of a poet's art or his mission.

In Tiresias the poet goes back again to antiquity, to the legend of the blind prophet who is in communion with the deities, and who, when Thebes is beleaguered and about to fall, proclaims the Divine decree that one man must devote himself to death for the salvation of his state and people. We have in this story the inveterate belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice that has run through the superstitions of all ages and countries; it contains the moral idea of self-devotion mixed up with the notion that the angry gods may be appeased by a precious victim; and the modern poet transfigures the legend into a lofty encomium upon the glory of patriotic martyrdom —

> "My son,
> No sound is breathed so potent to coerce,
> And to conciliate, as their names who dare
> For that sweet mother land which gave them birth
> Nobly to do, nobly to die. Their names,
> Graven on memorial columns, are a song
> Heard in the future; few, but more than wall
> And rampart, their examples reach a hand
> Far thro' all years, and everywhere they meet
> And kindle generous purpose, and the strength
> To mould it into action pure as theirs."

It is refreshing, after the dreary visions of a ruined and silent world, of the inutility of all human effort, and of the cold eschatology predicted by Science, to look back again in Tiresias on the ancient world, to a time when men were citizens of a petty state

instead of a vast empire, trained to meet real perils with fortitude and endurance, thinking always of the fortunes of their people, and knowing nothing of the remote destinies of mankind, nor balancing two worlds, the present and the future, against each other. In such conditions of existence their joys and griefs, their fears and hopes, were simple, direct, and confined within a narrow compass. As the idea of progress and the perfectibility of society had little or no hold on them, so they were not deeply discomposed by the knowledge that all things are mutable and transitory. As their minds were neither troubled by the prospect of an immeasurable future for the earth, nor by the discovery of its remote past, so they could concentrate their efforts and aspirations on the ideals which ennoble the present life, on courage, temperance, and justice, on making the best of it by harmonising the inevitable conditions of existence. To the poets and philosophers of antiquity, who knew well that the highest truths lie beyond experience, the rebellious outburst of Despair and the blank dismay of Vastness would have appeared irrational and profoundly inconsistent with the sense of duty and virtue, tending to obliterate the distinctions of good and evil, and to degrade all human society to the level of insects.

From the prison-house of materialism Tennyson himself found release in his firm trust that all things are divinely ordered, and that annihilation is inconceivable; yet his reflections on death are constantly tinged with misgivings. The verses added as an epilogue to Tiresias have the full spontaneous flow in perfect measure, with a sure echoing stroke of the rhymes, that attest consummate workmanship. In the prel-

ude he had greeted his old friend, Edward FitzGerald: and when he wrote these final stanzas he had heard of his death —

"The tolling of his funeral bell
Broke on my Pagan Paradise.

* * * * * * *

Gone into darkness, that full light
Of friendship! past, in sleep, away
By night, into the deeper night!
The deeper night? A clearer day
Than our poor twilight dawn on earth —
If night, what barren toil to be!
What life, so maim'd by night, were worth
Our living out? Not mine to me."

"The doubtful doom of human kind" haunts his imagination; he dwells upon the idea that Song will vanish in the Vast, will end in stillness, and he glances back regretfully at the pagan paradise — at those who

"Scarce could see, as now we see,
The man in Space and Time,
So drew perhaps a happier lot
Than ours, who rhyme to-day.
The fires that arch this dusky dot —
Yon myriad-worlded way —
The vast sun-clusters' gather'd blaze,
World-isles in lonely skies,
Whole heavens within themselves, amaze
Our brief humanities."

The conclusion, sooner or later, of the human drama, the finality of all earthly existence — these ideas have been the articles of primary belief in every religion, and belong to the presentiments and expectations that are natural to the human mind, for we are surrounded by decay and death, and the illimitable is an incon-

ceivable idea. But in apocalyptic predictions the earth itself was to be destroyed and disappear with all it contained, was to founder like a ship in mid-ocean, or like a volcanic island sinking suddenly. It is the prospect of this planet, a minute and negligible part of the universe, rolling round in its diurnal course after man and his works have vanished, of inanimate matter surviving with entire unconcern all vital energies, that seems to have oppressed the poet with dejection at the thought of mortal man's utter insignificance. In this mood life lost for him all interest and meaning, except through faith in the perpetuation of the spiritual particle; and his own quotation from Marvell indicates the prevailing bent of his reflections —

> "At my back I always hear
> Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
> And yonder all before us lie
> The deserts of eternity."

To such feelings his poetry gave sublimity and a transcendent range of contemplation; yet it must be remarked that they have a tendency to weigh down the mainsprings of human activity. They are akin to the subtle opiates of Oriental philosophy, which teaches the nothingness of sensuous life; but fortunately the energetic races of the world are not easily discouraged. For it is the inevitability of death that gives a stimulus to life; and strenuous minds draw a motive for exertion, for working while the light lasts, from that very sense of the brevity of human existence and the uncertainty of what may lie beyond, which, although Tennyson fought against it manfully, did undoubtedly haunt his meditations and depress the spirit of his later inspirations. He relied, indeed, upon the sense

of right, of duty, and of trust in the final purpose of a Creator; nevertheless, he seems to have been continually disturbed by the fear lest the scientific forecast of blank desolation for this planet, and the uncertainty of a future conscious existence for mankind, might fatally weaken the power of these high motives to fortify human conduct, and to sustain virtue. Yet in the four volumes of Jowett's *Plato*, which he received from the translator in 1871, he must have found — not only in the dialogues, but also in Jowett's characteristic commentaries — that loftier conception of service in the cause of truth and humanity, which can inspire men to go forward undauntedly, whatever may be their destiny beyond the grave.

In discussing Tennyson's poetry and his intellectual tendencies it has been necessary to disregard chronological sequence and to anticipate, for the purpose of a connected survey. We must now take up again the chronicle of his elder life, which is very slightly marked by events, except when increasing years brought ever-rising fame and public honours. In 1869 he was made an Honorary Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge; and in 1873 Mr. Gladstone proposed a baronetcy, but such promotion had evidently no attraction for him. In 1874 this offer was repeated by Mr. Disraeli (who does not seem to have been aware that it had been already made) in a high-flying sententious letter, evidently attuned to the deeper harmonies of the mysterious relations between genius and government.

"A government should recognize intellect. It elevates and sustains the spirit of a nation. But it is an office not

easy to fulfil; for if it falls into favouritism and the patronage of mediocrity, instead of raising the national sentiment, it might degrade and debase it. Her Majesty, by the advice of Her Ministers, has testified in the Arctic expedition, and will in other forms, her sympathy with science. But it is desirable that the claims of high letters should be equally acknowledged. This is not so easy a matter, because it is in the nature of things that the test of merit cannot be so precise in literature as in science. Nevertheless, etc., etc."[1]

The honour was nevertheless again respectfully declined, with a suggestion, pronounced by authority to be impracticable, that it might be reserved for conferment upon his son after his own death.

Mrs. Tennyson's journal for this time — when they lived alternately between Farringford and Aldworth, making an annual visit to London — is full of interest, recording various sayings and doings, conversation, correspondence, anecdotes, and glimpses of notable visitors — Tourguéneff, Longfellow, Jenny Lind, Huxley, and Gladstone, to the last of whom he read aloud the Holy Grail. At the house of G. H. Lewes he read Guinevere, which made George Eliot weep; and at home he was visited by General Charles Gordon, to whom the poems were a solace and a delight in perilous days at Khartoum. There was a project of bringing about a meeting with Newman, between whom and Tennyson an exchange, or possibly a collision, of philosophic ideas would have been well worth recording; but nothing came of it, and the meeting remains a good subject for an Imaginary Conversation. For Tennyson's table-talk at this period readers must go to the *Memoir*, from which it would be unfair to pick

[1] *Memoir.*

many sayings or anecdotes wherewith to season these pages. He had much of the epigrammatic faculty; he could condense a criticism into a few words, as when he said that Miss Austen understood the smallness of life to perfection; he could put colour into it, as when he remarks that poets enrich the blood of the world; and he could frame a thought, not always in itself very precious, with great felicity. Of amusing anecdotes that struck his fancy, or were collected by his friends to show the wide popularity of his poems, there are many; for at Farringford he was the cynosure of neighbouring eyes, while he was hunted by tourists abroad, and at home the visitors sat at his feet. He had indeed at this time to pass the ordeal of somewhat unqualified adulation, though one intimate friend, Mrs. Cameron, never failed to speak out her mind. His discourses on poetry, with his favourite quotations, prove a keen discrimination of literary quality, with a mastery of technique that is the gift of a practical artist. Among his quotations may be noticed, as a curiosity, the lines from *Henry VIII.*[1]:—

> "To-day, the French,
> All clinquant, all in gold, like heathen gods,
> Shone down the English; and, to-morrow, they
> Made Britain, India,"

where Shakespeare, in his large manner of illustrating the Oriental glitter of the English array on the Field of the Cloth of Gold, writes as one suddenly possessed by the

> "prophetic soul
> Of the wide world dreaming on things to come,"

[1] Act I. Scene i.

and falls unconsciously into a vision of the future. For nearly two centuries later it was the contest between France and England in the East that did actually and directly lead to the making of British India.

The diary is a faithful and valuable memorial of English country life at its best toward the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Living quietly with his family, he was in constant intercourse with the most distinguished men of his day, and was himself honoured of them all; a society that gave him all that he desired, and not more than he most undoubtedly deserved.

In 1878 came the marriage of his younger son Lionel to Miss Locker. Seven years afterward, in 1885, they made a journey to India, where Lionel unfortunately caught a fever of which he died on the homeward voyage. Tennyson's verses To the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, always the most largehearted and generous of friends, acknowledge the kindness and unmeasured hospitality which his son received during his illness from the Viceroy of India —

> "But while my life's late eve endures,
> Nor settles into hueless gray,
> My memories of his briefer day
> Will mix with love for you and yours."

With Carlyle Tennyson remained in constant intercourse personally, and with FitzGerald by letters, except for a short visit to him at Woodbridge in 1876 — "the lonely philosopher, a 'man of humorous-melancholy-mark,' with his gray floating locks, sitting among his doves." They never met again afterwards. It is a

rarity in modern life that two such men as Tennyson and FitzGerald, whose mutual friendship was never shaken, should have met but once in twenty-five years of life, although divided by no longer space than could be traversed by a three hours' railway journey. In FitzGerald's judgment Tennyson reached the grand climacteric of his poetry in the volumes of 1842, for the Idylls, and the later moral and didactic strain of verse, were not to his taste; though in 1873 he wrote to Tennyson, who had sent him Gareth and Lynette, that he admired many passages in the Idylls. It may be true, as is remarked in the *Memoir*, that FitzGerald's sequestered way of life kept him in a critical groove, and that he was crotchety is confessed by himself. Nevertheless, in the unanimous chorus of applause from all the illustrious men of that time, the dissentient voice of the scholarly recluse, always admiring and affectionate, was worth listening to; and many may question whether the settled opinion of a later generation will find much fault with it.

CHAPTER VI

THE PLAYS

When Tennyson, in 1875, brought out his play of Queen Mary, he made his entry upon a field into which no first-class English poet had ventured for a long time previously. Coleridge's play of Remorse had a fair run, because it was written down to the level of popular taste; and his poetic genius had little to do with its success. Shelley and Byron wrote dramatic poetry, and Shelley believed that The Cenci was well fitted for the stage, but it never appeared on the boards, although the figure of Beatrice is undoubtedly drawn with great tragic power. Byron openly declared that his dramas were not written with the slightest view to the stage; and, in short, we must go back to Goldsmith for a poet who was also a successful playwright. None of these poets had taken their plots or characters from English history; so that there was novelty in Tennyson's design of continuing the line of Shakespeare's English chronicle-plays by dramatising great periods of our history. In France the historic drama came in for a few years with Victor Hugo and the romanticists; yet it may be affirmed that no French dramatist of the first order has ever founded a play on the annals of France; and we may suppose that the classic taste and style, which rejects details and local colouring, dealing in noble sentiments rhetori-

cally delivered, had discouraged and thrown out of fashion any attempt to exhibit on the stage famous national events and personages, surrounding them with the variety of character and circumstance that belong to real life. Mrs. Tennyson notes in her diary for April 1874 that her husband had thought of William the Silent as the subject for a play; but had said that our own history was so great, and that he liked English subjects and knew most about them, so that he had begun Queen Mary.

From the point of view taken in the foregoing observations, therefore, we have a new departure in this play, which introduces us to that most critical epoch in the history of the English people, when violent religious changes, a doubtful succession to the crown, and foreign marriages had spread terror, suspicion, and discord throughout England and Scotland, producing that fermentation of conspiracies, rebellions, and persecutions which is generated by a mixture of religion and politics at a high temperature. The cardinal point of the situation was that in the middle of the sixteenth century the successions to both the English and Scottish crowns had fallen to daughters; and that this had occurred almost simultaneously with the culmination of the great revolt against the Papacy, with the fierce religious wars in western Europe, and with the contest between France and Spain for ascendency. The Emperor Charles V. married his son to Mary Tudor of England in order to secure an English alliance. As a counter move, Henry II. of France married the Dauphin to Mary Stuart of Scotland; and so the two Catholic queens, representing antagonistic politics, were ruling two kingdoms, in both of which

a powerful party of nobles, with strong popular support, were stubborn adherents of the Reformation.

> "Mary of Scotland, married to your Dauphin,
> Would make our England, France;
> Mary of England, joining hands with Spain,
> Would be too strong for France." [1]

No more arduous or complicated position, sure to develop character, has fallen to the lot of women than that of either Queen. Mary Stuart's life and death were infinitely the more romantic and pitiful; a beautiful frail woman swept onward as if by Fate to death on the scaffold, a sacrifice to implacable policy, fulfils the highest conditions of a tragic drama. Shakespeare might have written it, if she had not been so nearly of his own time. On the other hand, there is no romance, no play of wild passion, no fateful catastrophe, in the life of Mary Tudor; she had a touch of her father's courage, but also of his cruelty; she was a dull woman with no feminine charm; her reign was one long failure; and she left the grand part in history to be taken up and played royally by her sister Elizabeth. One might therefore say that Tennyson, in fixing upon Queen Mary and her reign, had chosen a difficult subject for the theatre, since the leading character is neither heroic nor intensely pathetic; she was a miserable disappointed woman whose name has an indelible stain of blood upon it. Nevertheless Tennyson's play is a dramatic reading of authentic history, executed with much animation and with imaginative force in the presentation of character. Although the interest in the story belongs rather to the events and circum-

[1] Act I. Scene v.

stances than to the persons, yet the poet fills in skilfully the historic outlines; he gives elevation to the speeches and sentiments; he realises for us the motives and actions of men and women who paid forfeit for a lost cause at the stake or on the scaffold; he exhibits lively pictures of the court and the street. He contrives to invest Mary with some dignity, and to extract from us some scanty sympathy with her unhappiness; though it is impossible to make of her the central figure on which the eyes of an audience should be riveted as the action proceeds. The main interest is rather political than personal. Cranmer, Gardiner, Wyatt, White the Lord Mayor, Paget and Pole, Noailles and Renard, pass over the stage and discharge their historical parts in speeches full of concise and characteristic expression; but to bring all these parts into dramatic unity, and to make an imaginative plot out of a page of familiar history, was probably beyond the power even of first-rate genius. Tennyson himself perceived that the older chronicles, which preserved only the striking features of the time, allowed greater scope to the creative faculty than a precise knowledge of men and events which binds a poet down to the facts, for the necessity of being accurate impairs the illusion; and the historical dramatist finds himself more at ease in a distant half-known age, or anywhere else than in his own country. Mary Stuart and Mary Tudor have been brought on the stage by foreigners, Schiller and Victor Hugo, in the latter case with indifferent success. Moreover, although broad colours and circumstantial details give the scenes a realistic impressiveness, they rather detract from the universality so to speak, which is the attribute of a

great drama. Shakespeare's finest plays are independent of and disregard such accessories.

Nevertheless the portrait painting, under these inevitable limitations, is very well done, and it illuminates an eventful period. The priests, statesmen, and martyrs of Mary's short and troubled reign stand out in clear relief; the strong light thrown upon their figures discloses the intrigues and clashing politics of a time when the balance seemed to hang even between the old faith and the new, just when the Spanish marriage was adding a heavy weight to the side of Rome. Paget, Howard, Wyatt, and Bagenhall represent the Englishman of that day for whom religion was a question of politics. Pole, Bonner, and Gardiner are the ecclesiastics for whom political power was an instrument for the enforcement of religious conformity. Mary and Elizabeth are the royal impersonations of the two parties, both princesses of the Tudor blood, with the inherited courage that rises to emergencies; but Mary has the foreign strain of bigotry, while Elizabeth, a full Englishwoman, has an instinctive understanding of and fellow-feeling with the real temper of her countrymen. On the whole Tennyson does Mary more than justice; for he uses the license of a dramatist to endow her with much more energy of speech and action than she can really have possessed, and to impart a fierce glow to her gloomy fanaticism.

Mary:

O God! I have been too slack, too slack;
There are Hot Gospellers even among our guards —
Nobles we dared not touch. We have but burnt
The heretic priest, workmen, and women and children.
Wet, famine, ague, fever, storm, wreck, wrath, —

We have so play'd the coward ; but by God's grace,
We'll follow Philip's leading, and set up
The Holy Office here — garner the wheat,
And burn the tares with unquenchable fire.[1]

Cecil's brief reflections, after conversing with Elizabeth, mark the contrast —

"Much it is
To be nor mad, nor bigot — have a mind —
Not let Priests' talk, or dream of worlds to be,
Miscolour things about her — sudden touches
For him, or him — sunk rocks ; no passionate faith —
But — if let be — balance and compromise ;
Brave, wary, sane to the heart of her — a Tudor
School'd by the shadow of death — a Boleyn, too,
Glancing across the Tudor — not so well."[2]

The passage is a model of laconic expression, indicating rapid and concentrated thought. In the general diction of this play the absence of ornament is remarkable ; the poet has put a curb on his fancy, and has stripped his English for the encounter of keen wits occupied in affairs of State ; the priests, politicians, and soldiers waste no words. Yet we have here and there familiar touches of the picturesque, as in Wyatt's reference to his father —

Wyatt :

Courtier of many courts, he loved the more
His own gray towers, plain life and letter'd peace,
To read and rhyme in solitary fields,
The lark above, the nightingale below,
And answer them in song.[3]

Also in the rendering of that well-known story of Wyatt reconnoitring the breach in London Bridge,

[1] Act v. Scene v. [2] *Ibid.* [3] Act. II. Scene i.

whereby he was cut off from the city, was forced to march round by Kingston, and failed in his enterprise—

> "Last night I climb'd into the gate-house, Brett,
> And scared the gray old porter and his wife.
> And then I crept along the gloom and saw
> They had hewn the drawbridge down into the river.
> It roll'd as black as death; and that same tide
> Which, coming with our coming, seem'd to smile
> And sparkle like our fortune as thou saidst,
> Ran sunless down, and moaned against the piers."[1]

The play of "Harold," which followed next in the "historical trilogy,"[2] takes us back to a period when history is still blended with romance; so that the dramatist could let loose the reins of his imagination, and could fashion his characters at pleasure within the broad outlines of tradition. He has thus escaped from the bonds of exactitude; he can be more poetic; he can even avail himself of the privilege, which is legitimate when used moderately, of giving a turn of modern sentiment to the language of personages belonging to a distant century. Yet Tennyson has nowhere in this play done violence to historic probabilities in his delineation of character and situation; he takes the main incidents, such as the detention of Harold in Normandy until he had solemnly sworn to acknowledge and assist William's claim to the English crown, the death of Edward the Confessor, the battles of Stamford Bridge and Senlac, and composes them into dramatic scenes as an artist might paint pictures of them. The dialogue between Harold and his brother Wulfnoth, when both are prisoners of the Norman at Bayeux, and when Wulfnoth is imploring

[1] Act II. Scene iii.

[2] Mary, Harold, Becket. *Memoir*, vol. ii. p. 173.

Harold to obtain their liberty by swearing fealty to William, has striking and finely versified passages; the pressure of conflicting feelings is well rendered. Will Harold yield and set them free for the sake of Edith whom he loves? He is touched deeply. Or for the sake of England?

Harold: Deeper still.
Wulfnoth:

> And deeper still the deep-down oubliette,
> Down thirty feet below the smiling day —
> In blackness — dogs' food thrown upon thy head.
> And over thee the suns arise and set,
> And the lark sings, the sweet stars come and go,
> And men are at their markets, in their fields,
> And woo their loves and have forgotten thee;
> And thou art upright in thy living grave,
> Where there is barely room to shift thy side.[1]

In this passage, as generally throughout the play, the metrical execution is superior to that of Queen Mary. The whole piece, indeed, is written on a higher poetic level; the language of the dialogues and speeches has a certain grandeur that was inadmissible in the mouths of the sixteenth-century notables, who were obliged to speak by the book; and the portrait of a noble warrior and patriot king is romantically enlarged out of the dim records of an unlettered age. In the final Act we have Harold going forth to the battle, the meeting of the armies, and Edith with the Saxon bishop watching the sway of a well-matched contest, until Harold falls: the intense excitement of the situation is powerfully suggested. The visions that pass through Harold's dream as he sleeps in his tent on the night

[1] Act II. Scene ii.

before Senlac, have an obvious precedent in Shakespeare's Richard III.; nor is the chant of the monks during the fight quite an original dramatic invention, yet they are both skilfully adapted to enhance the impression of the crisis. But the concluding speech of William the Conqueror over the bodies of Harold and his mistress, Edith, is somewhat marred by the introduction of a moral sentiment that sounds too much out of character with the time —

William: Leave them. Let them be!
Bury him and his paramour together.
He that was false in oath to me, it seems
Was false to his own wife. We will not give him
A Christian burial.

And possibly Tennyson did not at the moment recollect that William's mother had been just such another paramour as Edith.

It will have been noticed that the Trilogy takes no account of chronological order. If, at any rate, the play of Becket, which appeared last in the series, being published in 1884, had preceded Queen Mary, we should have seen the first beginning, under the Plantagenets, of the quarrel between Rome and the English State which came to a final breach under the Tudors. The *Memoir* inserts a declaration of the late Mr. J. R. Green, no light authority, that all his researches into the annals of the twelfth century had not given him so vivid a conception of the character of Henry II. and his Court as was embodied in Tennyson's Becket. Whether this is a superior quality in historic plays, may be open to argument; and at any rate one may demur respectfully to the rule laid down in a letter written on this

play to its author by Mr. Bryce, that "truth in history is naturally truth in poetry."[1] For accuracy of reproduction, though it gratifies the realistic demands of the present time, and gives pleasure to the cultivated reader, must have a tendency to cramp the imaginative freedom that wings the flight of dramatic genius; and some historical plays and romances of the first order abound with inaccuracies. Nevertheless the rule may be applicable to delineation of character; and in his two principal personages, Henry II. and Becket, Tennyson has embroidered upon the historic canvas with force and fidelity. The subject lends itself to dramatic composition by providing for the leading personage an ecclesiastical hero, the Archbishop, who overtops all the others, marking the central line of interest throughout; and whose violent death in the cause that he impersonates supplies a fitly tragic ending to the play. Then, also, the story of Rosamond and Eleanor provides just the romantic element of secret love and feminine vindictiveness that is needed to soften and vary the harsh disputing, the interchange of threats and curses, between priests and barons; and to Tennyson's skill in seizing and working upon these points of vantage we may attribute largely the success of this piece upon the stage. The language, as in Queen Mary, is sonorous and masculine, the dialogues are pointed in thrust and parry; and one or two important speeches have a stately tone well suited to their occasion.

Henry:

Barons and bishops of our realm of England,
After the nineteen winters of King Stephen —
A reign which was no reign, when none could sit
By his own hearth in peace; when murder, common

[1] *Memoir.*

As nature's death, like Egypt's plague, had filled
All things with blood, when every doorway blushed,
Dashed red with that unhallowed passover;
When every baron ground his blade in blood;
The household dough was kneaded up in blood;
The mill-wheel turned in blood, the wholesome plow
Lay rusting in the furrow's yellow weeds,
Till famine dwarft the race — I came, your king.[1]

In the scene where Queen Eleanor has tracked Rosamond through the labyrinth to her bower, threatens to kill her, and offers life to her on base terms, Rosamond, after kneeling for mercy, at last turns upon the Queen and replies in the right tragic spirit —

Rosamond: I am a Clifford,
My son a Clifford and Plantagenet,
I am to die then. . . .
Both of us will die.
And I will fly with my sweet boy to heaven,
And shriek to all the saints among the stars:
Eleanor of Aquitaine, Eleanor of England!
Murdered by that adulteress Eleanor,
Whose doings are a horror to the east,
A hissing in the west.[2]

It is a play that won not only the cordial commendation of scholars and men of letters, but also popular applause, and the foremost of our English theatrical artists willingly joined in giving it adequate representation; with the result that it held the stage beyond fifty nights, and Sir Henry Irving has said that Becket is one of the three successful plays produced by him at the Lyceum. The common remark that Tennyson was no born dramatist cannot be gainsaid; he was essentially a lyrical poet; and the lyric vein, being

[1] Act I. Scene iii. [2] Act IV. Scene ii.

different in kind and charged with self-consciousness, has to be suppressed or carefully controlled in dramatic composition, which must be entirely objective and impersonal. This necessity manifestly presses with peculiar weight upon the writer of plays that are intended to be illustrations of authentic history, where the limits of character-probability have to be observed; for the dramatist could not put fanciful ideas of his own into the mouth of Philip of Spain or Cranmer, and must curtail his lyrical exuberance. We may therefore admire the versatility of Tennyson's powers in the restraint which he placed upon his natural propensity; his plays are not poems in his own manner arranged dramatically, like Mr. Swinburne's Bothwell; nor are they romances cut up into dialogue; they are severe and strenuous presentations of real people and well-known events. This may be counted both as praise and dispraise; for somehow a drama that is closely tied to facts lacks universal interest; it cannot rise far above the ground, nor attain the heights that secure for it a permanent place in the national literature. Yet if Tennyson has not succeeded in the arduous and probably hopeless enterprise of reviving the historical drama, he deserves credit and sympathy for attempting it; and he has set an example, which is being followed in the romantic drama by a younger poet of his school in the present day,[1] of endeavouring to stem the downward current of deterioration in the taste of the playgoing public, by offering them plays of fine artistic quality and form, dealing seriously with momentous events and deep emotions, at a time when the national theatre is more and more reduced to

[1] Mr. Stephen Phillips.

ringing changes upon the trivial and commonplace situations of ordinary society.

The Promise of May takes very different ground. It was written somewhat unwillingly (we are told in the *Memoir*) "at the importunate entreaty of a friend who had urged Tennyson to try his hand on a modern village tragedy." This is a pastoral play, on a well-worn theme — the ruin of a farmer's pretty daughter, who has been captivated by the superior manners and pretentious talk of a young man belonging to the class of gentlefolk. When he appears on the stage with a book in his hand, we know from his first words what is coming; we can see that Tennyson is fetching another blow at the idol of materialism —

(*Enter Edgar, reading*) :

> This author, with his charm of simple style
> And close dialectic, all but proving man
> An automatic series of sensations,
> Has often numbed me into apathy
> Against the unpleasant jolts of this rough road,
> That breaks off short into the abysses — made me
> A quietest, taking all things easily.

The conviction, which throughout haunted Tennyson, that in default of a clear and certain prospect of immortality a man's soul may be lost utterly, that he must sink into sensuality, and cannot indeed be much blamed for it logically, is the moral exemplified in this play. It comes out in Edgar's excuse for seducing and deserting the girl —

Edgar: What can a man then live for but sensations,
> Pleasant ones? Men of old could undergo
> Unpleasant for the sake of pleasant ones
> Hereafter, like the Moslem beauties waiting

To clasp their lovers by the golden gates.
For me, whose cheerless Houris after death
Are Night and Silence, pleasant ones — the while,
If possible, here, to crop the flower and pass.

Farmer Dobson: Well, I never 'eärd the likes of that afoor.

Nor has any one else, in a London theatre. We have here the recurrent idea that scientific knowledge saps and destroys the basis of morality, and lets loose all the unruly affections of sinful men. Marriage is to Edgar an obsolete tradition —

Edgar: When the man,
The child of evolution, flings aside
His swaddling bands, the morals of his tribe,
He, following his own instincts as his God,
Will enter on the larger golden age;
No pleasure there tabooed.

This is scarcely a persuasive way of wooing a simple sweetheart, and Eva, the farmer's daughter, is naturally puzzled, while Dobson, Edgar's rival, is mortally suspicious of him; and at the end the materialist turns out a double-dyed villain, who gets off much too cheaply. The didactic strain is evidently out of place in a pastoral, save for the occasionally comic effect of an evolutionist discoursing among bamboozled farmers and ploughmen — an incongruous figure, brought in to be battered. And the thread that holds together the action and the personages is too slight. But the rural scenery and the talk of the peasantry bring out Tennyson's genuine knowledge of country life, and this part of the dialogues is, as in all Tennyson's plays, alert and amusing. On its first night the piece was received in a contentious spirit by the audience at The Globe, chiefly, as the

Memoir mentions, because it had been advertised as an attack against Socialism; "the public had mistaken its purpose." Yet although an experienced playwright declared at the time that he could have made it a signal success, it is difficult to believe that a travesty of moral philosophy (and, to be theatrically popular, it *must* be travestied) could ever have helped to sustain Tennyson's reputation as a dramatic author.

The other minor plays of Tennyson are of a different and brighter cast. In December 1879 The Falcon was produced at the St. James's theatre, and held the stage sixty-seven nights; it is a mediæval love story belonging to the class of ingenious *fabliaux*, told in the Decameron of Boccaccio, afterwards used by La Fontaine, and lastly arranged by Tennyson as a metrical drama in one scene. Fanny Kemble likened it to one of A. de Musset's light pieces, though it has not his sparkling wit. A lady makes a sudden visit to the knight who has been vainly wooing her. He must offer her some refreshment, so he is forced to kill his favourite falcon to provide a solitary dish; but she had come to demand of him for her son this very bird; and he has to confess that she has eaten[1] it. Such a sacrifice to love so touches the lady's heart that she marries him. The Cup, on the other hand, is in a graver vein, expanded from a story by Plutarch of a Galatian lady in the time of the Roman republic, who escapes a forced marriage by poisoning herself and a Galatian noble, Synorix, the traitor to his country, who had joined the conquering Romans and

[1] "Hélas, reprit l'amant infortuné,
L'Oiseau n'est plus, vous en avez dîné."
(*La Fontaine.*)

had murdered her husband. The political situation of a province just subdued by the Republic forms a good background to the action and gives it verisimilitude, for the story rings true as an incident that might well have happened in the circumstances. The characters are lightly yet distinctly set, with the strong emotions poetically expressed; and when we learn that Irving with the best English actress took the leading parts, with magnificently decorative scenery, it is easy to understand why The Cup had the longest run in England of all Tennyson's dramatic pieces.

Last of all, The Foresters was brought out on the New York stage in 1892, when it received a hearty welcome from the Americans, for whom this reminiscence of early English woods and wolds may have come like a breath of fresh air to their crowded rectangular streets. This play has the advantage of keeping well outside authentic history; for though Tennyson wrote of it that he had "sketched the state of the people in another great transition period of the making of England," he has luckily done nothing of the kind, but has given us the famous figures of popular tradition, handed down by the minstrels and rhymers, in a new and lively dress. Undoubtedly these legends reflect the feelings and sympathies of the English people at a time when the great midland forests sheltered bands of daring men, who defied the Norman law and kept up a sort of guerilla against the foreign yoke; and this is an atmosphere much more favourable to a romantic woodland drama than the climate of history. The introduction of Titania with her fairies (suggested, probably for scenic effect, by Irving) is a somewhat temerarious device, not only for

the obvious reason that they have been created once for all by a master-hand, but also because the pure magical touch was not in Tennyson; nor was his verse light enough for fantastic spriteliness, or his playfulness sufficiently volatile.

Titania: I, Titania, bid you flit,
And you dare to call me Tit.
First Fairy: Tit for love of brevity,
Not for love of levity.
Titania: Pertest of our flickering mob
Wouldst thou call my Oberon Ob?

Moreover, Thomas Love Peacock's Maid Marian, with its exquisite snatches of song and ballad, and the richer humour of its dialogue, had already traversed the same ground in prose. But at the end of The Foresters Tennyson's special qualities of picturesque suggestion and reverie come out in the dreamy melodious lines that drop the curtain on a vision of primitive romance.

Marian: And yet I think these oaks at dawn and even
Will whisper evermore of Robin Hood;
We leave but happy memories in the forest.
* * * * * * *
You, good friar,
You Much, you Scarlet, you dear Little John,
Your names will cling like ivy to the wood.
And here, perhaps, a hundred years away,
Some hunter in day dreams or half asleep
Will hear our arrows whizzing overhead,
And catch the winding of a phantom horn.

CHAPTER VII

THE LAST YEARS AND LATEST POETRY: CONCLUSION

In 1883 a peerage was offered by the Queen to Tennyson, who after some hesitation consented, under Gladstone's advice, to accept it. He took his seat, the first representative in the House of Lords of a purely literary qualification, in 1884; and in the same year he voted for the Franchise Bill, having stipulated with Gladstone and obtained a pledge that a Bill for the redistribution of constituencies should follow. The measure he held to be just and necessary, though Gladstone received from him a verse of warning against setting the troubled waters of politics toward a precipitate channel. Their views upon public affairs soon afterward fell more and more asunder; and we find Tennyson writing that he loved Gladstone, but hated his Irish policy; while the poet's natural distrust of "rash innovators" shows itself repeatedly in all his discourse upon the constitutional questions of this time.

The years of his declining life were passed between his two country houses, with excursions into the country, visits to London, and occasional cruises in a friend's yacht. He received old friends and privileged guests with kindly hospitality; talked on politics, religion, and poetry; spoke of men whom he had

known, scenes that he remembered, and books that he had read; received letters out of all lands, and replied to some of them with epigrammatic brevity. He was still occupied with the leisurely composition of his later poems.

From 1885 Tennyson had published, at intervals, three small volumes of poems, beside Locksley Hall Sixty Years After. One line in this poem its author held to be the best of the kind that he had ever written—

"Universal Ocean softly washing all her warless isles,"

though it is full of the sibilants that vex all English verse-makers; and the suggestion that the sea would become calm when the land should be at peace may be thought logically perplexing. It was but seasonable that Tennyson's latest poetry should have been tinged with autumnal hues. The range of his mind had been widened by constant assimilation with the expansion of scientific knowledge, and by long experience of the world; but as far horizons often produce a vague sadness, so his retrospective views of life, as he turns back and surveys it, are melancholy. In poetry and in prose the sequel to a fine original piece, written after a long interval, has very rarely, if ever, been successful; though the second part is often valuable to the biographer by illustrating the alterations of style and thought that follow naturally the course of years. Tennyson himself said that "the two Locksley Halls were likely to be in the future two of the most historically interesting of his poems, as descriptive of the tone of the age at two distant periods of his life." But it may be questioned whether the interest is not

rather biographical than historical, whether, in fact, the change of tone was not in the age, but in Tennyson himself. For there can be no doubt that the interval of sixty years, over which the aged squire in the second poem looks back so mournfully, was for the English people a period of active and eager enterprise, of social betterment and national prosperity. The grave forebodings of the poem, the sense of dismay at the ills of mortality, reflect the mood of the poet, not of the people. He would probably have replied that the poem was a dramatic representation of old age, and he disclaimed any identity with the portraits of his imagination; but it is impossible for an author to insist positively on his entire personal detachment from his poetic impersonations of thought and character. The choice of subject and its treatment mark unmistakably the dominant ideas; nor can an essentially lyrical poet give fervid expression to any feelings but his own.

On the whole, it must be admitted that the two last volumes fall below the level of his verse at its prime; nor could one expect or desire that after threescore years and ten a poet's age should not affect the force and fertility of his writing and his general outlook on life. Some of these late poems are overweighted with thought, the diction is too emphatic, the colour of his meditations takes a more sombre tinge than heretofore, and a certain cloudiness gathers over his loftier utterances. Yet in Demeter and Persephone we have still the delicate handling, the self-restraint, the severe air of his earlier compositions. The ancient allegory of the Earth goddess, the figure of Nature in flower and in decay, of the disappearance and return of the

harvest, is finely enlarged into the moral conception of light eventually conquering darkness, of Heaven finally prevailing over the sunless halls of Hades. The lines subjoined are full of his old picturesque charm —

> "Once more the reaper in the gleam of dawn
> Will see me by the landmark far away
> Blessing his field, or seated in the dusk
> Of even, by the lonely threshing-floor,
> Rejoicing in the Harvest and the grange."

And one well-known passage seems to connect, by a simile, Demeter's vision of her daughter with telepathic intimations — one of those obscure psychical phenomena which have recently come within the scope of scientific research —

> "Last, as the likeness of a dying man,
> Without his knowledge, flits from him to warn
> A far-off friendship that he comes no more."

The passing of such shadows over the brain is well known to be an old and perplexing experience; and Crabbe, who collected the legends of the seashore, alludes to such a visitation in one of his Tales.

Of Tiresias some mention has already been made. Possibly the miscellaneous character of these pieces may be thought to do some damage to their collective impressiveness, by suggesting that stray leaves may have been collected and appended to the principal poem in each volume. "Owd Roa," a story of a dog, told in Lincolnshire dialect that cannot be understood without a glossary, becomes wearisome in more than sixty stanzas; the more so because, being placed in the latest complete edition between Demeter and Vastness,

it finds the reader unprepared for such abrupt alternations of style and subject. No one, as has been said, would count it unnatural or unbecoming that in many of these poems the shade which perpetually hung over Tennyson's brooding mind should have become darker in the late evening of his days. His sympathy with human unhappiness repeatedly shows itself in such pieces as Forlorn, The Leper's Bride, Romney's Remorse, The Ring, The Bandit's Death, — all of which exhibit the sorrowful sides of life, and illustrate patience in suffering, repentance, or, in one instance, revenge. In the poem of Forlorn, where a mother adjures her daughter not to marry without confessing to her lover a long-past frailty, the tone is too vehement; and the same subject has been more emotionally handled in one of George Meredith's earliest poems, Margaret's Bridal Eve; where the mother disregards moral scruples, and takes the more natural part of urging the girl to conceal her fault; but she confesses, is renounced by the lover, and dies. Of the two versions one must prefer that of Meredith, who strikes a superior keynote, and creates the right tragic situation by throwing the strain of conscience and the merit of self-sacrifice entirely upon the daughter.

The same gloominess of atmosphere overhangs The Death of Œnone. The beautiful mountain-nymph of Tennyson's youth, passionately lamenting her desertion upon Mount Ida, has now become soured and vindictive; she is a resentful wife to whom Paris, dying from the poisoned arrow, crawls "lame, crooked, reeling, livid, through the mist," imploring her to heal him. Œnone spurns him as an adulterer who may "go back to his adulteress and die"; yet at his death

she throws herself into the flames of his pyre. Tennyson said that he considered this poem even more strictly classical in form and language than the old Œnone. To some of us, nevertheless, it may seem that its tone of stern reprobation jars with the style and feeling of antique Hellenic tradition. The story is taken from a short passage in a late Greek writer;[1] and we may remember that in Homer the adulteress Helen is found living happily and honourably after the war with her husband in Sparta. And Tennyson's propensity to enforce grave moral lessons has led him to lay the lash so heavily on Paris as to disparage Œnone and provoke compassion for the sinner.

The spirituality of the East, whence all great religions of the world have originated, had a strong attraction for his meditative temperament; but he never threw its deeper philosophy into concrete form, though he sketched the beginning of a poem upon Ormuzd and Ahriman, the Manichæan spirits of good and evil. Akbar's Dream, the single study made by Tennyson of an authentic Asiatic figure, does indeed embody the lofty ideal of an eclectic Faith transcending formalism, sectarian intolerance, and the idols of the crowd, and seeking for some spacious theology that shall comprehend the inner significance and aspirations of all external worships. Akbar, however, was not, could not be, a great spiritual leader of men; he was a large-minded politic emperor ruling over manifold races and conflicting creeds; and he himself foresaw that his eclectic system could not take root or endure. This general conception of his character and position is drawn in grand outline, though the subject is too

[1] Apollodorus.

large for so short a poem; and the concluding Hymn to the Sun is a majestic song of praise —

"Adoring Him the Timeless in the flame that measures Time."

The last poem that Tennyson finished was The Dreamer, who hears in his sleep the wail of the Earth rolling through space, the mournful music of a sphere oppressed by the burden of the sins and misfortunes of the race whom it is bearing along, helpless and unwilling, to an uncertain destiny. The poet endeavours to cheer our disconsolate planet by the assurance that

"All's well that ends well,
Whirl and follow the Sun,"

which may be understood allegorically as of hope in the Light that leads.

The Death of Œnone and Akbar's Dream, with other minor pieces, are in the volume which closed, in 1892, the long series of poems that had held two generations under their charm. Throughout that period, almost equal in length to Queen Victoria's reign, Tennyson maintained his foremost place among the Victorian poets; and although one can mark the slow decline of a genius that had reached its zenith fifty years before death extinguished it, yet hardly any English poet has so long retained power, or has published so little that might have been omitted with benefit to his permanent reputation. Nor will it ever be forgotten that in his eighty-first year he wrote Crossing the Bar, where the noiseless indraw of the ebb-tide from the land back into the ocean is a magnificent image of the soul's quiet parting from life on earth and its absorption into the vastness of infinity.

It is apparent from the *Memoir*, at any rate, that the weight of more than fourscore years depressed none of Tennyson's interest in literature and art, in political and philosophic questions; nor did it slacken his enjoyment of humorous observation or anecdote. Among many recollections he told of Hallam (the historian) saying to him, "I have lived to read Carlyle's *French Revolution*, but I cannot get on with it, the style is so abominable"; and of Carlyle groaning over Hallam's *Constitutional History*, "Eh, it's a miserable skeleton of a book" — which brings out into summary comparison two opposite schools of history-writing, the picturesque and the precise. He praised Carlyle's honesty, but said that he knew nothing about poetry or art. He told how the sage of Chelsea once came to smoke a pipe with him one evening in London, when the talk turned upon the immortality of the soul, and Carlyle said, "Eh, old Jewish rags, you must clear your mind of all that," and likened man's sojourn on earth to a traveller's rest at an inn; whereupon Tennyson rejoined that the traveller knew whither he was bound, and where he should sleep on the night following. FitzGerald, who was present, might have quoted to them his own stanza from Omar Khayyam, which gives the true inner meaning of the famous parable of the dervish who insisted on taking up his quarters in the king's palace, which he declared to be nothing more than a caravanserai.[1]

Robert Browning's death in December 1889 dis-

[1] "'Tis but a tent where takes his one day's rest
A Sultan to the realm of Death addrest;
The Sultan rises, and the dark Ferrash
Strikes, and prepares it for another guest."

tressed him acutely; it was a forewarning to the elder of two brothers in verse for whom posterity must decide whether they are to be equals in renown. "A great thinker in verse," Tennyson said of him; and again, "He has plenty of music in him, but cannot get it out; he has intellect enough for a dozen of us, but he has not got the glory of words." Their distinctive styles and qualities are so well marked that each poet sets the other in relief; and the generation that had two such interpreters is singularly fortunate. In the junior poets of his later day he took a sympathetic interest. He wrote kindly to Rudyard Kipling, whose patriotic verse pleased him, and to William Watson, who twelve months later paid a grateful tribute to his memory in one of the best among many threnodies.

His last residence at Farringford was in the spring and early summer of 1892, when he made a yachting voyage to the Channel Islands; and by the autumn he was at Aldworth in Surrey. Lord Selborne and the Master of Balliol visited him, but he told Jowett that he was not strong enough for the usual discussions between them on religion and philosophy. Jowett answered, "Your poetry has an element of philosophy more to be considered than any regular philosophy in England," which might be interpreted as an ambiguous and possibly not an extravagant compliment.

The final chapter of the *Memoir* gives briefly some of his latest sayings, and describes a peaceful and noble ending. He found his Christianity undisturbed by contentious sects and creeds, but, he said, "I dread the losing of forms; I have expressed this in my Akbar." When, at the end of September 1892, he fell seriously ill, and Sir Andrew Clarke arrived, the

physician and his patient fell to discussing Gray's Elegy; and a few days later, although he had become much worse, he sent for his Shakespeare, but he was obliged to let his son read to him. Next day he said, "I want the blinds up; I want to see the sky and the light." It was a glorious morning, and the warm sunshine was flooding the Sussex weald and the line of the South Downs, which he could see from his window. He lay with his hand resting on his Shakespeare, unable to read; and after midnight on the 6th October he passed away very quietly. The funeral service in Westminster Abbey, with its two anthems — Crossing the Bar and The Silent Voices — filling the long-drawn aisles and rising to the fretted vault above the heads of a great congregation, will long be remembered by those who were present. His pleasant and prosperous life had been varied by few griefs or troubles; he had attained signal success in the high calling that he had set before himself; he had won honour and fame among all English-speaking peoples, and he departed at the coming of the time when no man can work.

A comparison of Tennyson with Browning has already been touched upon. Browning's obscurity, when he was engaged upon his minute mental anatomy, his manner of leaving his thoughts rough-hewn, are points of contrast with Tennyson's clear and chiselled phrasing; we have less light as we go deeper. The truth is that Browning's psychologic studies are too diffuse and discursive for the compact and vivid treatment that is essential to poetry. And the peculiarity of his genius — the strain and hard

service that he imposed upon the English tongue — place him to some extent outside the right apostolic succession, in its direct line, of our national poets, of those who have enlarged the capacity of our language for imaginative and musical expression, without subjecting the instrument to rough usage. Among these Tennyson may certainly be counted. To lay stress upon the metrical variety of his poems, upon his experiments in classical prosody, or upon his development of the resources of the language for harmony, would be to repeat what has been frequently said by others. It may be questioned whether he could give his rhythm the swift movement, as of a thoroughbred racer on turf, that is produced by Mr. Swinburne in some of his most elaborate compositions, where the accent and the quantity fall together; nor had he the resonant organ-notes of Milton when he was playing a symphony upon the open vowels. Yet his power of smoothing down linguistic harshness and difficulties was remarkable; and his skill in the arrangement of words to connote physical sensations has been already mentioned. His command over the long, flowing line, which no poet before him had used so frequently, gave it the flexibility that served him well in such pieces as The Northern Farmer, where the broad dialect required free play; while in other poems he could give this metre the sounding roll of a chant or a chorus. On the instrumental resources of blank verse we know that he set the highest value. "Blank verse," he said once, "can be the finest mode of expression in our language"; he had his own secrets of arranging and diversifying it; and all the latest composers in this essentially English metre have

profited by his lessons. But for a thorough analysis of Tennyson's management of blank verse, in comparison with the other masters of the art, the student must again be referred to Mr. J. B. Mayor's "Chapters on English Metre," where the styles of Tennyson and Browning, as representatives of modern English versification, are critically examined.

It will have been seen that some attempt has been made in these pages to combine a short biography of Tennyson with a running commentary on his poems, as they illustrate his intellectual habit and the circumstances of his life. And to some extent the result accords with Taine's generalising treatment of literature as a bundle of documents that reveal and record the conditions, social and climatic, moral and material, in which it was produced, and thus elucidate history. Yet in the case of a writer who is almost our contemporary, this analytical method is too easy to be of much importance, for there is an obvious and necessary correspondence between his work and his world; the man and his *milieu* are both well known to us; the characteristics are those of his class and his nation; we have only to put together causes and effects that show manifestly the correlation between the environment and its product. Among the signs of his time may be noticed, in particular, the influence on his poetry of the scientific spirit, the growth of accurate habits of observation, the demand for exactitude in details, for minute delineation of accessories, for a patient study of small things; the spirit, in fact, which has affected art and literature in the form of what is now called realism. No poet has been more solicitous than Tennyson about precision in his land-

scape painting, or more carefully correct in his allusions to animals and plants; and in most instances the precision of fact strengthens the ornamental form, like a solid building architecturally decorated. Burke, in his treatise on the Sublime and Beautiful, observes that "there are reasons in nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting in poetry than the clear"; but in Tennyson's verse the exactitude has in no way detracted from its beauty. And his metaphors are much more than figures of style; they very often do really intensify a vivid sensation. Yet the scientific impulse carries him too far when experimental physics are made to furnish a metaphor for unbearable emotion—

> "Break, thou deep vase of chilling tears,
> That grief has shaken into frost."

We have to understand that at a certain low temperature water, if shaken, will expand into ice and break the vessel that contains it; and so a heart that is benumbed with grief will be rent if it is agitated by a too painful recollection. We may admire the technical skill that has compressed all this into two short lines; but the metaphor is too ingenious, and the effort of seizing the analogy undoubtedly checks our sensibility to the poet's distress. He is much more in his true poetical element when he returns to the contemplation of the mystery that no scientific research can penetrate or unravel, when he plucks the flower in the crannied wall—

> "If I could understand
> What you are, root and all,
> I should know what God and man is."

"Toute l'immensité traverse l'humble fleur du penseur contemplée," says Victor Hugo; the microscope and telescope, the vast prospects and retrospects thrown open to us by Science, still leave the world no less an unintelligible enigma than before. Between mythology and science, between the capricious elemental divinities and the conception of fixed mechanical laws, we travel from the earliest to the latest stages of man's perpetual endeavour to decipher the secrets of nature. The myths have always lent themselves to poetry, which indeed may be said to have created them; and Tennyson has given new form and moral significance to some of the ancient fables. But his imaginative faculty was also applied to the metaphysical problems which lie beyond the range of discovery; and he has treated the laws of nature as the index and intimations of the infinite Power that moves somewhere behind them. Whatever may be said of him as a philosopher, it may be granted that in this region of ideas he has produced some splendid poetry, and has illustrated the questioning spirit of his age. In the latest poems his dismay at the pettiness of man's part and place in the cosmic evolution, at the vision of a godless ocean sapping and swallowing up all definite beliefs, seems to have gradually quieted down into the conviction that a higher and purified existence surely awaits us. Such short pieces as Doubt and Prayer, Faith, The Silent Voices, and others in the small volume of 1892, are passing Thoughts versified, like the Gnomic sentences in prose of Pascal or Joubert. Their tone is generally hopeful and devout; and the Silent Voices of the dead call him

"Forward to the starry track,
Glimmering up the height beyond me,
On, and always on."

In Wordsworth's famous Ode the celestial light is behind us, and slowly fades into the light of common day —

"Whither has fled the visionary gleam?"

We look back at "the immortal sea which brought us hither." In Tennyson's poem of Merlin and the Gleam the light is in front of us across the great water —

"There on the border
Of boundless Ocean,
And all but in Heaven
Hovers the Gleam."

If, again, we descend from these spheres of lofty speculation, and turn to the positive and practical aspects of Tennyson's poetry, we may allow that it undoubtedly represents the ideas and tastes, the inherited predilections, the prevailing currents of thought, of Englishmen belonging to his class and his generation. Moderation in politics, refined culture, religious liberalism chequered by doubt, a lively interest in the advance of scientific discovery coupled with alarm lest it might lead us astray, attachment to ancient institutions, larger views of the duty of the State towards its people, and increasing sympathy with poverty and distress — all these feelings and tendencies find their expression in Tennyson's poems, and will be recognised as the salient features of the national character. In the direction of political ideals his imaginative faculty enabled him sometimes not

only to discern the movement, but also to lead the way. The imperial conception—realising the British empire's unity in multiplicity, regarding it as a deep-rooted tree which sustains and nourishes its flourishing branches, while the branches in return give support and vitality to the stem—was proclaimed in his verse before it had attained its present conspicuous popularity. He saw that the edifice had been quietly set up by builders who made no noise over their work; and he called upon all English-speaking folk to join hands and consolidate it. The revival and spread of profound veneration for the Throne, as the common centre and head of a scattered dominion, is another outcome of the same idea that owes its development to the last thirty years of Queen Victoria's reign; and some share in promoting it may fairly be attributed to the Laureate's stately verse. In all these respects, therefore, it will be right for the future historian to treat Tennyson as a representative of the Victorian period, and to draw inferences from his work as to the general intellectual and political tendencies of the nineteenth century. Yet a single writer can at most only present particular aspects of a general view, coloured and magnified in poetry for the purposes of his art, and refracted through the medium of his own individuality, which is always strong in men of great genius, who are apt to survey their world from different standpoints, and often to take opposite sides, as in the instance of Byron and Scott. It could therefore be of little advantage to enlarge further upon this theory in a biography.

In the domain of pure literature it is less difficult to measure Tennyson's influence, and to define his

position, so far as one may venture upon doing so within a few years of his death. One can perceive, looking backward, that his genius flowered in due season; there had been a plentiful harvest of verse in the preceding generation, but it had been garnered, and the ground was clear. About this time English poetry had relapsed into one of those intervals of depression that precede a fresh rise; the popular taste was artificial and decadent, running down to the pseudo-romantic and conventional forms, to a false note of sentiment and to affectation in style. The hour had come for the man who could take up the bequest of that brilliant and illustrious group who, in the first quarter of the century, raised English poetry to a height far above the classic elegance of the eighteenth century, and beyond the domestic, nature-loving, verse of Cowper and Crabbe. A new impulse was needed to lift it, and to break in upon the dulness that seems just then to have settled down, like a passing cloud, upon every form of art. This flat and open space gave Tennyson a fair start upon the course, and favoured the recognition of his superiority; although his general popularity must have spread gradually, since we have seen that even in 1850, when the choice of a new Laureate had to be made, his claim was not admitted without deliberation in high political quarters. Yet all genuine judges had already found in Tennyson the poet who could revive again the imaginative power of verse, who possessed the spell that endows with beauty and artistic precision the incidents and impressions which a weaker hand can only reproduce in vague outline, or tamely; while the master is both luminous and accurate. His first welcome was

in the acclamation of his contemporaries; and herein lay the promise of his poetry, for to the departing generation the coming man has little to say. During Tennyson's youth the whole complexion and "moving circumstance" of the age had undergone a great alteration. It was the uproar and martial clang, the drums and trampling of the long war against France, the mortal strife between revolutionary and reactionary forces, that kindled the fiery indignation of Shelley and Byron, and affected Coleridge and even Wordsworth, "in their hot youth, when George the Third was king." Tennyson's opportunity arrived when these thunderous echoes had died away, when the Reform Bill had become law, and when the era of peace in Europe and comfortable prosperity in England, that marks the middle of the nineteenth century, had just set in. This change in the temper of the times is reflected in his poetry; the wild and stormy element has disappeared; his impressions of the earth, sea, and sky are mainly peaceful, melancholy, mysterious; he is looking on the happy autumn fields, or listening in fancy to the ripple of the brook, or the plash of a quiet sea.

Length of life, maturity of experience, abundant leisure, and domestic happiness must also be reckoned among the tranquillising influences that have imparted the charms of equanimity, self-restraint, and exquisite finish to the best of Tennyson's poetry.

In 1890 Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was Tennyson's junior by only twenty-three days, wrote to him: —

"I am proud of my birth year, and humbled when I think of who were and who are my coevals. Darwin, the destroyer and creator; Lord Houghton, the pleasant and

kind-hearted lover of men of letters; Gladstone, whom I leave it to you to characterise, but whose vast range of intellectual powers few will question; Mendelssohn, whose music still rings in our ears; and the Laureate, whose 'jewels five words long'—many of them a good deal longer—sparkle in our memories."[1]

This is a brilliant constellation of talents to have shot up out of a single year (1809); and the lives of all these men, except Mendelssohn, were long; they had full scope for their various capacities. But among Tennyson's precursors in the poetic arena three leaders had died young in the foremost ranks, Byron, Shelley, and Keats: two of them in the midst of feverish activity, they were all cut off suddenly and prematurely. The sum-total of their years added together exceeds by no more than eleven the number that were allotted to Tennyson's account. And if the productive period of a poet's life may be taken to begin at twenty-one (which is full early), it sums up to about thirty-one years for all these three poets, and to above sixty years for Tennyson alone. By the time that Coleridge was twenty-six he had produced (we are told[2]) all the poetry by which he will be remembered, and critics have declared that Wordsworth did all his good work in the decade between 1798 and 1808. It was Tennyson's good fortune not only to reach a greater age than any other poet of his century, but also to sustain the excellence of his verse for a longer period. Wordsworth, indeed, lived and wrote up to old age; and in him, as in Tennyson, we have the contemplative humour, the balance of mind swaying occasionally

[1] *Memoir.*

[2] *Coleridge*, by H. D. Traill ("Men of Letters" series).

between cheerfulness and dejection, that is natural to men who are passing quietly through all the stages of life. Nor should we forget that each of them was most fortunate in the affection of his family and in a well-ordered home; while Byron and Shelley were incessantly at war with society, and Coleridge's matrimonial venture brought him nothing but vexation and embarrassment.

Tennyson's face and demeanour, which have been preserved in the fine portraits of him by Watts and Millais, were so remarkable, that at the first sight one took the impression of unusual dignity and intellectual distinction. His voice, gesture, and bearing impersonated, so to speak, his character and reputation; his appearance fulfilled the common expectation (so often disappointed) of perceiving at once something singular and striking in the presence of a celebrity. Jowett wrote of him after his death that he was a magnificent man who stood before you in his native refinement and strength, and that the unconventionality of his manners was in keeping with the originality of his figure. He enjoyed his well-earned fame and the tokens of enthusiastic admiration that came to him from near and far; he listened to applause with straightforward complacency. From the sensitiveness to which the race of poets is proverbially liable he was not free; and there are passages in his poetry which indicate a shrinking anticipation of the inquest that is now held over a notable man immediately after his death, to scrutinise his private life, and to satiate public curiosity. Under the title of The Dead Prophet he published (1885) verses that express this feeling by the rather ghastly image of a great teacher of the

people "whose word had won him a noble name," left stripped and naked after his death before a staring crowd, his corpse laid bare by his friends, and insulted by those whom the Prophet had offended. This poem was written, as the *Memoir* tells us, because Tennyson felt strongly that the world likes to know about the "roughness, eccentricities, and defects of a man of genius, rather than what he really is." It is a very natural popular craving to desire minute knowledge of everything that completes a full-length portrait and re-creates the living bodily presence of a famous man who has passed away; nor would any man of his eminence in our time be more likely to gain than to lose by such a scrutiny than Tennyson. But in the Recollections contributed to the *Memoir* by some distinguished men who were qualified to speak of him by long friendship and close personal intercourse, we have ample descriptions of his private life, his way of thought, his conversation, and the various sides of his character. We know already what he really was; we are aware of his susceptibilities; and by respecting them with the deference which they would command if Tennyson were still alive, we shall best honour the memory of an illustrious Englishman and a true and noble poet.

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